Royal Cheetah the Untouchable

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The Royal Cheetah and the Untouchable

ELSIE W. STROTHER

The forest was not quiet, as Natu had expected. All night the cries and roars and screams of animals and the murmur of insects kept him awake. Courageously, in spite of his terror, he tried to plan for the new life that was beginning.

Natu was an "untouchable" in nineteenth-century India. He was used to providing food for his parents by stealing in the crowded bazaars of the city slum. When his father died, Natu had rebelled against the tradition that a widow should throw herself upon her husband's burning funeral pyre. He had led his dazed but obedient mother and his adopted sister, Sunara, into the open countryside.

Survival in the country demanded new kinds of ingenuity and skills. Foraging for food was difficult. The little family was weak from a diet of boiled leaves and lizards and caterpillars. Tomorrow Natu must learn to kill game, and they must build a hut of mud and dung to shelter them behind their barrier of thorns. Natu was full of courage. Had not the holy man advised him that he would find his fortune in the Gir Forest?

Natu could not foresee the future that night or he might have been more frightened. He

(Continued on back flap)

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by

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SUMMARY: In early nineteenth-century India, an untouchable boy and his adopted sister determine to save their mother from the certain death of a widow and seek a new life in another part of the country.

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To
Buist, Reinette, Jamie,
and Christopher

Foreword

This story is about India in the early days of the nineteenth century.

In those times eighty-five percent of India's people existed in villages of less than five thousand population, where ancient social order still persisted. Maharajas ruled their big or small princedoms with power of life and death over their subjects.

The village of Pathan and the Maharaja's palace and villages are imaginary but typical of the time. The Gir Forest and the Rann Desert are real areas in the northwest of India.

Natu, Sunara, the Maharaja, and all the other characters are imaginary, and any seeming resemblance to actual persons of the time is as real as the author can make it.

1

NATU scurried from behind a pile of peppers to the shelter of a table laden with goatskins. The closer he kept to the ground, the greater his chance of picking up grains of rice or a stale and withered vegetable and perhaps an occasional crumb of bright-pink sugar candy. He had to be quick. The pye-dogs, those agonizingly thin, mangy animals, long-legged, short-haired canines with terriers' muzzles and tails curled over their backs, were as alert as Natu. Anything edible disappeared as soon as it was dropped. If hungry children failed to see a tidbit, it was pounced upon by a pye-dog, a lizard, or a mynah bird.

Once, and Natu remembered it as his luckiest day, a cart drawn by a white bullock had been tipped to one side and several melons had rolled into the dry, sun-baked dust. Screams of rage and shaken fists had only sped his triumphant race to the shelter of the mud huts, outside of town, which he called home.

The smell of India was alive and vivid in the bazaar: open drains, coconut oil, smoke from dried cow dung being used as fuel, curries cooking with garlic, vegetables bubbling, and chapaties—cakes of unleavened dough—frying in rancid grease. The smell was a familiar one to Natu and made his empty stomach rumble.

His filthy dhoti, soiled almost to the color of his brown

skin, held in its folds a handful of rice, two cabbage leaves, a maggoty bone, and a tiny piece of carded wool. He could now crawl to the marvel that had fascinated him from early childhood. As he kept out of the sight and the touch of others, darting across the crowded bazaar, he pictured this wonder and felt the same awe that he had always felt. To make marks on paper that meant something to others was a miracle! This marvelous, awe-inspiring sight was a professional letter writer who sat cross-legged in the dust, anxious clients crowding about him. To Natu he was the wonder of the world. To write! To read! What magnificence! What a miracle of learning! To have this talent was to have wisdom, untold wealth, happiness, and a full belly. Natu made his cautious way, slinking like a pye-dog, careful to keep even his shadow from touching the shouting merchants and their wares.

On one side of the letter writer was a barber with his kettle of steaming brown water. On the other, a contemptuous moneylender listened to the pleas of customers. The murderous July heat in the unspeakable squalor of the bazaar of Pathan gave the water vendors a profitable day.

As Natu eased toward the letter writer, a small girl with pinched features and hollow eyes started to crawl after him. Her hugely distended, starving belly kept bumping into things and she wakened in Natu a wary alertness. For, like himself, she was an untouchable.

"Go away," Natu hissed at the child. He could slither and slink and keep out of trouble, but if this little one attached herself to him, his dodging and hiding would be of no use.

She lifted eyes blinded by painful tears and Natu knew in his heart that he would have to help her.

"Here," he said, handing her his rice and bone. It didn't shock or revolt him to see her eat the maggots, one by one, or chew the hard grains of rice, and then suck on the odor-

ous bone. He would have done the same himself had he not been planning to take his precious loot home to his mother's stewpot. Now he would have to start his search for food over again.

Carefully he threaded his way back toward the other side of the bazaar. Later that day he would follow livestock in the alleys, picking up the fresh dung to take home to dry and to sell as fuel for a few pice, coins worth almost nothing, but useful nevertheless.

In order to avoid an oil-lamp stall, he brushed against a brass vendor.

"Filthy son of a pig!" the vendor bellowed. "Now I must go home and bathe! Dirty Shudra! Stinking Bhangi! You should be hung up by your ears!"

Natu darted away and hid behind a sacred cow who was placidly chewing her cud. His pulses hammered and his throat was dry. He knew, for his mother had told him, that untouchables were born sinners who were Hindus like the high castes, but who would have molten lead dropped in their ears if they should hear the Vedas. The Vedas, a bible of the Hindu faith, told that Brahmans, the priests and educators, had sprung from the head of Brahma, the supreme God. The soldiers had sprung from his arms, farmers and merchants from his belly, and Shudras, or untouchables, from Brahma's feet.

Natu peered under the cow and saw the brass vendor arguing violently with a water carrier. They were gathering a curious crowd and Natu saw his chance. With the stealth of a cat he darted past two stalls. At one he grabbed a packet of rice. At the other he snatched a handful of beans and was off with the quickness that shouts and curses lent speed to.

Out of sight, out of town, mud houses clustered together. Doorless openings yawned blackly and thatch roofs sagged and gaped. The stench was ferocious. One could almost see

the hunger stalking like a white tiger. Children's stomachs were bloated. The ill and aged were too weak to search for something to eat. The air was heavy with poverty, hopelessness, and degradation.

But to Natu the slum was home. It meant the comfort of his mother. It was safety of a sort and a place to catch his breath.

Rani, Natu's mother, was already home. Her work of the day completed, she was turning the cow dung over to dry the underside.

"My son," she said. That was all, but Natu felt the love behind the sparse words.

Rani, to earn a few annas, daily cleaned the Brahmans' drains, swept their paths, and bore away their garbage in an oozing basket, which she hoped to sell for a pice or two. An anna in those days was worth less than one American penny and a pice was a quarter of an anna. A rupee, seldom seen in the Bhangis' huts, was worth about fifteen American cents.

"Rest, my Natu," Rani said when she saw the rice, beans, and two cabbage leaves. "You provide us well. We will feast this night! I have meal, too, and will make us some chapaties. Pay your respects to your father, Natu, and then rest." She carefully tucked the bit of wool into her sari. Later it would go onto her loom with the other scraps gathered from day to day.

Natu wished he could stay outside with his mother. It was unpleasant to go in the dark hovel where his father lay, barely able to move with a disease that made the arms and legs swell and look like tightly stuffed brown sausages.

The father said nothing as Natu approached and bowed. "I hope you are feeling better, my father." He bowed again and escaped to the relatively fresh air outside, where he sat down and rested against the mud wall.

Absently he watched the unowned and unwanted pye-

dogs as they sniffed and snuffled over heaps of rubble. His dream came back as it always did in a moment of idleness. There were two things to dream of. One was a burning desire to get a blue glass bangle for Rani's thin wrist. He pictured it, shining with blue purity, against the wrinkled and rough skin of his mother's hand. The other was to learn to read and write. What he couldn't do in this dismal world with that knowledge! Both wishes were as unlikely to be fulfilled as a desire for the moon to play with. He was an untouchable. High-caste Hindus put out orders that Bhangi women could not wear jewels or carry umbrellas. That was a laugh. Who had an umbrella?

Natu guessed that Rani suspected his second wish and had tucked the knowledge away with other sadnesses because she knew that his desire for betterment was doomed. It was a dream that made him happy, though.

Natu had no idea how old he was, nor did he care. Counting was done on the fingers of one hand, if there was anything to count. From his skeletally thin stature one could suppose his age to be somewhere between twelve and fifteen. There was a break in his voice that might mean adolescence. His brown body, black eyes, unevenly cropped black hair, quick movements, and stealthiness all made for an awareness and adultness beyond his actual years.

He stretched and yawned and pressed his hands on his achingly empty belly. It was time to collect cow dung. As he rose to his feet he became aware of a small figure crouching behind the pye-dogs' rubble heap. Large black eyes stared unblinkingly at him. It was the girl from the bazaar. The one he had given the rice and bone to.

"You followed me!" Natu accused her when he was close. "Why?"

"Because you are kind," the girl whispered.

"Why don't you stay with your family?"

"My father died." Her voice faded. "My mother—" The whispering grew fainter and one word hit Natu like a stone. "Suttee."

Suttee was something he had always forced out of his mind. Suttee was something that would happen to his mother when his father died. Only once had he seen the ritual, but it had scarred his heart forever. He could still see the flaming funeral pyre of an unknown man and the widow who was required to throw herself on the same grave to be burned alive. Quickly he pushed the memory back.

"Brothers and sisters?" he harshly demanded of the trembling child. She shook her head. "Gone."

"What do you want?"

"Just—just to stay with you."

This was an unheard-of request. Another mouth to feed! Another body to squeeze into the malodorous mud hut! Another thing to worry about!

"In the name of Vishnu!" Natu cried. "What a thing to ask! I—I'll ask my mother," he added in a softer voice.

That is how Sunara became Natu's sister. Rani had always wanted a "worthless" girl child.

2

INDIAN BABIES were born with only a fifty-fifty chance of living at all, and parents were encouraged to have large families. So Natu knew that Rani had always felt guilty that she had produced only one child, despite the perpetual scrounging for food. He knew that she had prayed to

Siva, at the same time giving thanks that her one child was a son. Daughters were not valued and Rani would have been considered worthless had her child been female.

Sunara partook of their daily fare, thin soup and occasional chapaties, and gradually her distended belly disappeared. She helped Natu steal; she helped Rani care for the swollen father; she made it her job to turn the cow dung and to watch that other Bhangis didn't spirit it away to their own piles. As she worked and lost the pain of hunger, her eyes brightened and it was apparent that she was not a young child. She could stand straight now and her small figure gave signs of maturing.

Natu had accepted Sunara's presence in the family without enthusiasm, but also without umbrage. He found that she was fleeter of foot than he and they made an efficient team in the bazaar. They had a pattern of behavior maddening to the merchants but good for the stewpot. One or the other would *almost* brush against a stall or let his or her shadow *almost* touch a vendor. While the vendor was shrieking and threatening, the other snatched any eatable within reach and then both ran. The performance could be repeated out of sight of the first victim. Their stewpot had never before been so well filled.

But the heat continued and wells began drying up. Droughts were to be expected each summer, but usually, just before desperation, the monsoon rains deluged the country, saving crops and stock and replenishing wells.

This year the drought was severe. The heat paralyzed the populace. The smells of habitation without plumbing, the sweltering in the fierce sun, the rotting, the listless, hopeless people became nauseous even to those accustomed to it.

Rice crops failed. Vegetables became almost nonexistent. Disease was rampant. Famine was gruesomely illustrated by withered bodies dying in the alleys. The bazaar was almost

lifeless. Water vendors asked exorbitant rates. The sacred cows wandered unmolested through the streets, lowing their thirsty discomfort.

Natu and Sunara crept back to their home, day after day, with nothing to show for their efforts. Rani now performed her lowly work not for annas but for scraps of food to keep her family alive. The Bhangis' well went dry. This was far worse than mere hunger. Water is the one thing the human body cannot do without. Hardly a mud hut went without its death. Funeral pyres seldom had time to cool. Babies were too weak to cry. Adults looked apathetically out of hollow eyes. Bellies distended rapidly. Natu's silent father began to toss and moan.

"My mother," Natu said, his voice hoarse from dryness, "in the city there are wells. I am going—"

"No!" Rani cried. "They are Brahman wells! You know what they do to Shudras if they contaminate anything belonging to the Brahmans!"

"I will be careful. I will go in the dark of night."

"You must not, my son." But Rani's tired voice lacked conviction.

"I will go with you," Sunara said.

"Certainly not!" Natu said with severity. "This is man's work!" He picked up their now useless leather bucket.

There was no moon that night, but the stars in the starkly cloudless sky gave enough illumination so that a skulking boy had to hug the dark walls and slither around corners.

The heart of Pathan was not very far from the living quarters of the untouchables, but Natu had to go slowly, hiding in shadows when someone else was on the street, ducking into doorways when even a pye-dog was seen. A dog could bark and bring unwelcome eyes upon an unwanted stranger. The leather bucket was heavy and Natu wondered how he could carry it home when it was full of

precious water. But he would do it, even if it pulled his arms from their sockets.

There it was, the well he had sought. There were two women and a man filling their buckets and talking. Would they never leave? Natu could smell the water and his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. On and on they talked. The man left, but the women settled down to a good gossip. Natu settled down too. He had not survived all these years by rashness. Patience and stealth were the keynotes of his life.

At last a baby cried and the women went their separate ways, one running toward the cry with water splashing out of her bucket. Before she had entered her doorway, a pye-dog was avidly licking the dampened earth.

Natu waited until the pye-dog had dispiritedly wandered away, then he crept forward.

Slowly, eyes darting from side to side, he circled the well, ready to run at the approach of anything. The coast was clear. He leaped to the edge of the well and lowered the attached bucket into the forty-foot depth. He planned to take a drink and then pour the water into his own bucket and leave.

It was a long, heavy haul, but at last the brimming bucket was in his hands. He dipped his whole head in it and gulped great swallows.

"Bhangi!" The cry came from a window and then people exploded from their doors, shouting and screaming, "Bhangi! Shudra! Untouchable!"

Natu dropped the bucket back into the well and ran. He had covered a few yards when a terrible blow hit his back, another hit his legs and he fell to the ground. Then blow after blow descended on his body, his arms, and his head; screams of "Bhangi!" merged into the beating; pye-dogs barked in excitement; he felt blackness, hurt, and despair. Agni, the Vedic god of fire, was running through

his pain. He was aware, before he lost himself in dark unconsciousness, of the Brahmans' wails. "Contaminated! Our well is unclean! It cannot be used until we find a holy man to purify it! Oh, Lakshmi, oh, goddess of luck, why have you forsaken us?"

Natu never could understand why he was not beaten and stoned to death. Perhaps it was because of the Brahmans' frantic desire to find a holy man that they left his mangled body against a wall in a narrow alley.

He awoke in pain and felt flies swarming on his bloody head, but he tested his battered limbs, one by one, and found they were not broken. Quickly his mind came alert. While it was still dark he could crawl, and when day came he could pretend to be just another body in the alleys. A dead body meant nothing to the Hindus. What is the human body but a temporary shell to enclose the soul on one of its countless journeys through rebirth and death before becoming one with the true God? The fat vultures best beware, Natu swore under his breath, even though they were the biggest of the living things who waxed fat on death and corruption. He was not dead yet!

It took him two days to crawl back on the same path he had traversed before in two hours. When at last he dragged into his home village it was to the sounds of wailing. Both his mother and Sunara had covered themselves with ashes and were bowed with grief, moaning their incantation.

Their rejoicing was great when they saw him, but his bloody injuries quickly silenced them. There was nothing to clean him with but their own dirty saris, and they gently placed him inside with his now unconscious father.

Natu was wakened out of his deep sleep by a patter on the thatch. The patter increased and a trickle of liquid dripped on his shoulder.

"The rains! Monsoon!" he yelled as the trickle became a cascade.

"Indra, blessed lord of the rain, has come to us on his white elephant!" Natu heard the exultant cry outside the hut. There were shouts and laughs and prayers as he struggled to his feet and plunged out into the downpour. He felt only stiffness in his body now and stings where the water touched the raw spots.

The Bhangis stood with their faces uplifted, mouths open, clay pots held high to catch the freshest, purest of the cloudburst. Children cupped their thin hands to hold the precious drops.

With the relief, in a few days came discomfort. Shambles of mud, slippery as grease, turned the alleys into quagmires. To shelter from the rain and to do their cooking, the Bhangis had to move their fires inside the huts. The tiny rooms were stuffy from the pungent, blinding cow dung smoke. Eyes grew red-rimmed. Flies and mosquitoes moved inside, too, and malaria struck countless thousands of Indians.

One morning Rani found that her husband had died quietly during the night. For a moment stark terror was in her eyes. Strangely then, a trancelike calm took the place of terror. She went into a dazed, unfeeling sort of pre-death, a type of self-induced anesthesia, a dreamy world of unreality. Perhaps that was what made widows' immolation on their husbands' pyres a ritual that could be borne.

Natu was defiant.

"I will not have my mother die that horrible death just because my father, who has been practically dead for years, has stopped breathing! I won't! Sunara, what are we to do?"

Sunara's eyes were black wells of resignation. She had lived through the horror with her own mother, and to her it was just another grief in this world of sadness.

"No!" Natu exclaimed. "We will leave Pathan. Tonight!"

Rani merely shook her head when Natu told her of his plan. With a far-off look in her blank eyes, she went to help prepare the funeral pyre that would turn her husband and herself to ashes on the morrow.

Sunara was suddenly fired by Natu's plan. For once, it seemed possible to thwart tradition and to live according to wish instead of rite.

"We can do it, Natu! I'll help! Where—where will we go?"

"West." Natu's eyes were shining with hope. "We will live off the land."

"How?"

"I don't know," he said impatiently. "We just will!"

He watched Sunara gather together their few belongings. A packet of rice, some beans, a clay pot, a sari that had been discarded by the Brahmans who had employed Rani, the ragged cloth that covered the dead father. The loom was too big to carry, but Sunara carefully untied the warp threads and lifted off the weaving. Natu pictured the way Rani had worked at her loom, her emaciated body swaying in rhythm to a song she made up as she went along, and wondered what their life would be now. There was a fearful trembling inside him. They had always lived with others crowding around them. The lack of privacy was important to them. They hated to be alone. To live in company made them feel safe.

In the late afternoon Rani glided home, her eyes glazed as if by hypnosis. There was only a flicker of recognition as Natu and Sunara guided her into the hut. Apathetically she ate what they fed her and apathetically she let them lead her when they left the squalor of the Bhangi village late that night.

The rain had started again and swarms of mosquitoes followed them as they plodded through the mud.

Natu felt a surge of guilt. They were leaving his father's body to the ministrations of unloving hands. The body would be put in some community funeral pyre with one or more uncared-for corpses, unmourned and quickly forgotten. Natu made himself think only of the uncertain future, and cheered his thoughts with the knowledge that he had saved his mother.

3

Natu led his dazed mother by the hand, Sunara closely following. The night was black and occasional heavy rains drenched and chilled the small group.

"When light comes," Natu whispered to Sunara, "you will hide with my mother and I will try to find food, or steal, or—or something."

Sunara nodded and looked worriedly at Rani. Rani's face was beginning to show life again and was wrinkled into a frightened frown. She still followed docilely, but her eyes flicked from side to side, somehow knowing that they were in unfamiliar territory. The mud huts were far behind. The fields looked unending in the dark and the trees loomed like great giant ghosts beside their path.

Suddenly she cried out, "What am I doing here? Why? Why am I not allowed to— I have always been a good and faithful wife! I must go back to the funeral pyre at once! Now! Do you hear? I must!"

She came to a dead stop on the narrow road.

"Come, my mother." Natu's voice deepened into the authority of the man of the family. "That is behind us. We go to find another life. Start walking again, Rani." He surprised himself by calling her name, but when his mother obeyed without question he knew it had been the right thing to do. Her frown deepened and several times she shook her head in apparent disbelief, but she kept up to Natu's hurried pace, clutching his hand and keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Can we rest soon, Natu?" Sunara's voice was edgy with fatigue.

"When light comes," Natu replied. "Not before."

The night seemed unending to Natu, too, but the miles they were putting behind them spurred him to ever-renewed vigor.

When at last the horizon had a milky glow and the landscape took on shape, he picked out a huge banyan tree far off the road and led his little party to it. The deeply indented roots of the giant made ideal sleeping and hiding places.

With exhausted sighs, they each picked a root and lay down.

Natu didn't sleep, but his tired young body was refreshed by just lying there and looking up into the leaves as they reflected the pink dawn. Soon he would start his hunting for food. The small supplies they had brought with them must be saved. He wondered whether the laws of the country were the same as the city. He remembered very well that in Pathan if a Shudra should steal anything belonging to a Brahman and get caught, the magistrate was authorized to cut off his hand.

Sunara and Rani were deeply asleep when Natu stretched to his feet and quietly left the tree. Far to the right he could see a man in his field planting one grain at a time in back-breaking work. Would it be wise to stay out of sight of the

farmer or would there be a chance to steal some of the grain he was planting?

Coming down the road toward him was a holy man dressed in rags and holding his begging bowl in one claw-like hand.

"Baksheesh!" Natu could hear the distant cry as the holy man neared the farmer. It was a familiar sound to Natu. The bazaar at home had many such men begging for alms. Some of these ascetics had laid themselves on a bed of cactus and seemed above all human pain. They used a drug called Bhang that Natu knew about. He knew of its power to blunt suffering and he was not unduly impressed by the priests on their beds of thorn. Once his mother had relieved his father's pain with a smidgen of it she had begged from the Brahman family she worked for.

The farmer looked up, shook his head, and stooped over again.

The holy man was definitely someone to avoid, so Natu crawled through a thicket and made off rapidly.

Clouds gathered overhead again and soon rain beat down furiously. Natu kept on going, unaware that layers of dirt were being washed off his head and body, wondering only if they would have to dine off boiled leaves today. There was nothing to steal in the country! It had never occurred to him that his way of life would be changed when he left Pathan.

He skirted a small village. There were too few people around for him to be lost in a crowd and too many who would see him if he were to try to steal there. But he paused to watch from behind a tree as boys his age plastered their mud huts with cow dung. A handful of the oozing stuff was slapped against the wall and another handful on top of that. Natu soon saw the reason for it. One hovel, unlived in, was slowly melting away in the rain. Evidently the dung preserved the mud. He stored the knowledge

away in his mind. The dung would dry there, too, in the hot season, just as well as on the ground, maybe better. He left the tree feeling pleasurably proud of acquired wisdom.

The rain had already brought the miracle of life to the parched earth. Grass was greening, leaves were making ready to provide shade and shelter for insect and animal. The dead land started pushing up small strange bulbous shoots, and Natu could feel a change in the soil under his bony bare feet. A billion seeds awoke and were sending forth fibers to drink the moisture.

A rustle in a nearby bush and pile of rocks brought Natu to quick alertness. He saw a large lizard flicking his lightning tongue at some invisible bug. Here was dinner! Natu cautiously picked up a sharp stick and inched closer. The lizard's reptilian head turned from side to side, but Natu's stillness made him blend into the surrounding bushes.

With a darting thrust Natu speared the lizard behind the head. It jumped and flipped over on its back, short legs beating the air, long tail slashing. Natu reached to grab it, but suddenly the lizard rolled over and moved partly into a hole in a rock. It was moving too fast for Natu to hold. His hand caught the tail, trying to turn it, to flip it over, but the lizard was surprisingly strong and the tail was slippery. Quickly Natu rubbed one hand in the muddy sand under the leaves and took a firmer hold. No matter how he pulled, not an inch could he budge the lizard. It was apparent that it had blown itself up till its body was bigger than the opening in the rock. How long it could stay inflated with air Natu didn't know, but he would not give in. He was the head of his family and responsible for keeping them alive.

"Die!" he whispered to the lizard. "Die now!"

The lizard must have been badly wounded. Natu could tell by the insects who were drawn by the smell of blood. They buzzed and pestered him. They swirled around his sweaty face, crawling close to his eyes and into his nostrils,

stinging and torturing. He tossed his matted hair at them.

Suddenly Natu fell backward as the reptile came free from the hole, dead and deflated.

His feeling of triumph and satisfaction that he could provide food for his family without having to run from outraged vendors made him walk proudly as he carried the limp carcass. It was a long walk back to the banyan tree, but he was so full of virtuous pride the way seemed short. It was the first time he had not stolen what they were to eat.

The banyan tree looked like a home to him when he saw its huge girth with its sheltering roots. He was about to break into a run when he came to an abrupt halt. Someone was sitting with Sunara! His mother was close by with her head hanging almost on her chest. What to do? He couldn't run away, deserting his family. They had no friends, so this person had to be an enemy! Natu walked slowly forward, holding the lizard now as a weapon. Somehow he would save his mother and sister.

To his surprise Sunara came running up to him, her face alight with news.

"Natu!" Her voice rang like a bell. "The holy man is here! He won't harm us or tell on us! He—he gave us a chapati and—and he's telling Rani comforting things!"

Natu's suspicions were not quieted and warily staring at the holy man, he approached the tree, still holding the dead lizard by the tail ready to slash out with it.

"Come close, my son." The holy man's voice trembled with age and tiredness. "I am not to be feared!"

Instinctively now, Natu knew this to be true. And in case it wasn't, he knew himself to be bigger and stronger and faster than this ancient beggar.

Rani lifted a tear-stained face as he came up to her. Never had he seen her cry before, not even when hunger had made them all hurt.

"What have you done to my mother?" he shouted at the holy man.

"Oh, Natu!" Rani smiled through her streaming tears. "I need no longer be ashamed! The holy man has said that the rite of suttee isn't needed to prove a widow's faithfulness anymore! I am so—so grateful and relieved!" Sobs racked her thin body and Natu looked at her in astonished disbelief. Her words were ones of happiness, but she was weeping uncontrollably. He looked at the holy man with hostile eyes.

"Have you never seen tears of joy, my son?" The holy man's bleary eyes had a look of kindness and Natu relaxed. It was, after all, what he had hoped his mother would come to feel. He felt a lightening of his heart.

"I have brought us supper!" he said proudly. "We will be happy to have you join us, Holy One!" It was a grand feeling to be able to offer hospitality.

"You may use my fire," the ancient said quietly, "but I may not partake of flesh. We will also cook chapaties. It is enough to keep me alive, and that is all I ask." Hinduism forbids the eating of meat. Belief that humans may be reborn in animal form protects living things. But the untouchable in his unbearable state feels he can become no worse and pays less attention to the law.

Natu saw that a small fire was merrily crackling in the shelter of a nearby root. Cooking would certainly make the lizard more edible. They dined well that day. There was a feeling of happiness they had seldom known in the Bhangi village. Whether it was due to full stomachs or the presence of the holy man or the relief of Rani's conscience was hard to tell. When the rain fell periodically they were more protected by the big tree than they had been in their thatched mud hut in Pathan.

Several days were spent with the old man under the

banyan. Despite his rags and his begging bowl, the holy one had thoughts of the whole universe, of Brahma and immortality, of human reason and the purpose of life. Thoughts of this kind had never entered the minds of the Shudra family before. Natu found that thinking thoughts was wonderful. Up till now, aside from his yearning to be like the letter writer in the bazaar, his only thoughts had centered around his and his family's empty bellies. The holy man spoke words that meant little until Natu had mulled them over in his mind, so unaccustomed he was to meditation. The old man spoke of the power and limitations of people, of resignation and courage. He warned Natu of the future. Because of having been kicked and cuffed and beaten in childhood, it would be natural for him to cuff and kick and beat others when he was grown up, to assuage his wounded feelings. This was to be avoided in order to have a manhood worthy of the name.

Natu looked with awe at the old one, who frequently lapsed into a reverie, absently picking a flea or a louse from his scraggly beard and carefully placing the insect, unhurt, on the ground. He certainly didn't look any cleaner than Natu, so it was a surprise when the old man insisted that they wash themselves and their clothes in a nearby stream using sand as soap. The results were amazing. Their bodies were sore from the scrubbing but were three shades lighter in color. He told them to cleanse their teeth with ashes from the fire. It was an extraordinary feeling. Their filthy clothing could never come entirely white, but the shabby dhoti and saris sparkled in comparison to what they had been. The most dramatic change was in their black hair. Silky and shining, combed with forked twigs, it gleamed and fell in smooth ripples.

With a knife borrowed from the holy man, Rani helped crop Natu's thick thatch to a shiny black cap on his head

and took hours to brush Sunara's waist-long locks. Rani's hair was streaked with silver, a fact they had not known when it was covered with dirt.

They said nothing when they looked at each other, but each thought how handsome the others were.

"I must continue my journeys," the holy man said one morning, "and you, Natu, must find your future. I believe it awaits you in the north. In the Gir Forest. Opportunity is for those who can recognize it. Just try to avoid the Maharaja's grounds. There is much that is evil there. May Vishnu protect you and your family and may Lakshmi go with you!"

He hobbled away from the tree without a backward glance, his begging bowl once more in front of him.

4

IT WAS SAID that the Maharaja kept a thousand hunting cheetahs in his stables. It was not true. He had twenty, all imported from Africa. They might well have looked like a thousand big cats to the peasants on the Maharaja's lands. The cheetahs with their long, fleet legs that carried them like the wind through the forests and plains were an awesome sight.

Of the twenty, Puransing, a lovely tawny female, was the Maharaja's favorite. She was carried, hooded like a falcon, on a palanquin to the forest, whereas the other nineteen walked there on leashes held by the stable staff.

The Maharaja, His Exalted Highness, the Prince, known to his palace staff as H. E. H., was master of countless thousands of acres, but when the chase was on, the hunting

often extended beyond his domains. No one ever questioned his right to be anywhere, he was so powerful and rich. At a younger age he had ridden horseback on the hunts but now, with his enormous fat, only an elephant could bear his weight.

It was time, H. E. H. had said to his ministers, to introduce his two oldest sons to the sport. Perhaps their actions would help him in the decision he would have to make in the next year or so, that terribly important decision as to which son would become his heir.

The Maharaja had many wives, kept in purdah from the inquisitive eyes of men or strangers, and many children. But the two oldest were born on the same day, almost to the minute, of different mothers. So H. E. H. waited to see how they grew up before naming his successor.

"Summon Ashraf and Kedah," he commanded one of his ministers. "Now!" he said as the minister hesitated.

"At once, Your Highness! But—but we have already looked for them, anticipating your desires, my Prince," he said ingratiatingly, "and they were not to be found!" His smile vanished as the Maharaja's small black eyes took on the look of a snake's. The whole of the palace staff had learned to watch those eyes encased in layers of brownish fat, shadowed by the black brows that met solidly over his beaklike nose.

"At once, sire!" The minister's voice had a tremor to it. "I myself will personally find them!" He scurried away carrying the awesome picture of the Prince in his mind—the black beard that covered His Highness' multiple chins, the small red mouth that could utter words of life or death, the tapered, limp fingers laden with jewels that could be tender with his favorite cheetah and cruelly strong in the vicious pinches that he was amused to inflict on his hangers-on, all lent speed to the frightened minister.

Ashraf was behind the delicate lattice of pink sandstone

that concealed the women of the palace. He was allowed, at certain times, to visit his mother there, but it was strictly forbidden to dally with any other female. A young cousin, pretty and flirtatious, was the lure for Ashraf. It was not that he was deprived of feminine company. Ministers, guardians, and hangers-on had outdone one another to provide the boys with the companionship of pretty female playmates when they might be interested. Girls were gentler than boys and it wouldn't do to have the young princes bruised. Ashraf had always enjoyed feminine company, and this forbidden fruit, this girl who belonged to his father, appealed strongly to Ashraf's daring.

Through the lattice he saw the minister hurrying and looking purposeful. Ashraf bid a hasty farewell to the pretty cousin and went to locate his mother.

When the minister found him he was sitting at his mother's feet, his dark, handsome face looking innocent, his small frame showing a promise of being padded with fat like his father's.

"I am sent, Your Young Highness, to tell you and Kedah to report to the Prince immediately. Do you know where your brother is?"

"Naturally not!" Ashraf got to his feet and preceded the minister out of the building. "Why should I? We have different interests!"

The minister knew that very well, as did everyone in the palace.

Kedah was in the stables. He loved the horses that were housed in one section, he loved the elephants in the nearby paddock, and he adored the hunting cheetahs. Puransing was his favorite as well as his father's. The beautiful female cheetah knew him and tolerated his caresses with a queen-like condescension. Her small head with the black stripes from inner eye to mouth pushed up against his stroking

hands, the cold orange eyes slitted in enjoyment and the fearsome claws extended and dug deep into the earth.

After patting all twenty of the cheetahs, Kedah moved on to the elephants. He had a favorite among them too. Before he got there he could hear the great rumblings of the elephants' stomachs. He knew that the big beasts were twenty-four-hour feeders, eating four hundred pounds each of fresh-cut grasses every day plus a couple of hundred pounds of dry fodder. No wonder their digestive tracts made a noise! Added to their menu were melons, pineapples, coconut meat, and funny-looking balls of flour, rice, onions, and salt held together with molasses. Each elephant required at least fifty gallons of water a day.

Kedah could hear the mahouts chanting and singing. That meant that some wild elephants had been captured, for the songs helped to calm the panicked beasts. The mahouts sang about how brave and strong and handsome the animals were.

As he neared the enclosure the air became suffused with mixed smells of dung, crushed sweet elephant grass, burning wood, and cooking oil. He wouldn't be able to greet his favorite, Koonki, who was trained to capture wild elephants. She would be busy setting an example to them and pushing her weight against the obstreperous ones.

Just as Kedah was hailing the mahouts, the minister, with a harried, harassed frown, hurried up to him.

"I have looked everywhere for you, Young Highness!" He was breathless. "H. E. H. wants you and Ashraf immediately! Hurry! Ashraf is already there!"

Kedah braced his tall, well-muscled body. To come into his father's presence needed a certain amount of courage. Kedah's face, not so handsome as his brother's, became creased with a worried frown.

As he approached the large red sandstone palace with its

graceful stone lattices, he had a feeling of oppression. Being summoned to his father's chambers meant something bad was going to happen.

The Maharaja felt that his sons should witness his management of the serfs, the land, the women, and the animals, so that whichever was to follow him as ruler would know how to rule. He had absolute power of life and death over his subjects, and it was believed by all that his power descended directly from the sun and moon.

Once the boys were made to attend when a horse that had displeased the Prince was beheaded. Several times they had seen a peasant who had failed to give the Prince his yearly tribute have his ears chopped off. Another time a Bhangi boy who worked in a lime vat treading hides was refused neutralizing agent. Unless he washed with it every quarter hour, the strong lime would eat away the flesh. Many hideous deformities had resulted from this labor. The boy had committed some small crime and would be crippled for life because of it.

The cruelty of the Maharaja was not exceptional. Many of the ruling class believed that they were actually helping the lower castes to a better reincarnation, that suffering purified, and that the evil in the peasants was lessened by mutilation. Some even convinced themselves that they were being noble to inflict punishments.

When the boys were children their father watched their reactions carefully. He was pleased with Ashraf's sparkling, excited eyes. A true son of a true ruler! Kedah held his bitten lips with enormous dignity, trying not to show the horror he felt. The Maharaja noted that too. The boy had courage, more than his brother.

As they grew into manhood there was little change in each one's pattern of behavior. It was going to be a difficult decision for the Prince to make. They were now almost

seventeen and he would name his heir on their eighteenth birthday.

Ashraf was leaning carelessly against a carved chest when Kedah entered and bowed to his father.

"Late as usual, eh, snail?" Ashraf taunted.

"I came as quickly as I could!"

"Sons!" the Maharaja thundered. "I didn't have you brought here to quarrel! One more word and you will not participate in the hunt!"

"Hunt!" both boys exclaimed.

"'Hunt' is what I said. When Koonki can be spared from the wild elephants we shall take the cheetahs and go after deer—chital stags and sambar. Both of you are to ride horses."

"Are you going to ride Koonki?" Ashraf asked.

"Don't I always ride Koonki?" his father answered. "Stupid question!" The Prince looked annoyed and Ashraf visibly shrank.

"I want you each to pick the horse you want and ride it daily. I want you to be in complete control of your mounts before we go on the hunt."

"Yes, Father." The boys were unsuccessfully hiding their excitement. To be allowed on a hunt meant that they were no longer boys. With the dignity that befitted manhood they bowed and turned to go.

"One other thing," the Prince said. "I have engaged an English tutor for you who will arrive soon. Absolute respect is to be given this man by both of you!"

The Maharaja was following a tradition. He himself had had an English tutor when he was a boy. In all the ruling princedoms it was a matter of status to have the sons of the Prince speak English and often go to England for further education.

"A tutor?" Kedah asked.

"Why do we need a tutor?" Ashraf's face showed surprise.

"You will be educated to fit your positions," the Maharaja said. "The learning you have now is not adequate. You know numbers and reading only. Now you will learn English, read classics, solve mathematical problems, and know science. Perhaps I shall be able to see which of you is most able to take my place eventually. Now go!"

There were times when the half brothers were close and friendly. It happened when they were both punished or both surprised by gifts. It happened now. They walked out of the Maharaja's vast chambers arm in arm.

"He's going to let us hunt!" Kedah cried.

"Which horse are you going to pick?" Ashraf asked. "That gray stallion is my choice."

"He didn't say we could have stallions. He said horses."

"What about an English tutor for us?" Ashraf changed the subject. "I've done all the studying I want! Do you think he'll work us hard?"

"Our father can speak English, you know."

"I haven't the least desire to learn English, or anything else!"

The boys chatted amicably of hunting and studying as they walked to the stables.

Their friendliness lasted longer than usual this time. Riding their horses together—Ashraf wasn't allowed the stallion he had hoped for—and making bets on races through the fields, wondering about their coming tutor and discussing the worth of sambar against chital stags, all made for an unusual companionship.

"I saw a picture of an Englishman once," Kedah said as they trotted into a nearby village. "He had a clipped gray moustache and wore a glass in one eye."

"I've heard that Englishmen smell bad," Ashraf replied. "They eat meat, you know!"

Both boys made disgusted faces and then Kedah's attention was drawn to the village sights. They were always a source of interest to him and he slowed his mount to a walk.

"Come on!" Ashraf exclaimed impatiently.

"You go on. I'll see you later."

This village was not all Hindu. Kedah's eyes were drawn to two Muslim beggar women of low caste. Their heads and faces were hidden under thick, enveloping burkas. Through the narrow mesh that let them see out, he imagined large sorrowful eyes and wished he had some annas to give them. But the Maharaja's sons never carried money. All comforts and luxuries were supplied them at home, and who could think that anything outside the palace would require coins?

The Muslim women were not allowed to ask aloud for alms. Their plea was written on a scrap of paper. It was a poor living but an orthodox one.

As Kedah passed by he would have been shocked and depressed to see the women's eyes gleaming with hatred of him through the mesh.

Whenever he thought of the future he saw himself as ruler. He knew his chances of becoming ruler were not too great. His approach to life was very different from what his father's or Ashraf's would be. He had once read a child's story about a benevolent ruler whose people loved him. He had forgotten the plot, but the moral stuck in his mind. He hoped that as ruler he would never forget that he was trustee for his people. He dreamed of being a scholar who would interrupt his studies of ancient Hindu scriptures to receive delegations of petitioners. He would reform the rule and never forget a promise. He recognized that it was uneconomical, as well as inhuman, to let serfs starve.

All the villagers looked starving to him. Actually they were not. None looked healthy, but Kedah had never seen the Bhangis of the slums to compare them with. In the

village there was a small lake that people washed their clothes in, that animals wandered freely in, that was the drinking water of the whole settlement and the breeding ground of mosquitoes. The same sight was seen wherever a village was fortunate enough to have a lake of its own, and it never occurred to Kedah that anything was wrong with it.

Tethered cattle, goats, and leggy chickens got out of his way as he slowly passed along the rutted village road. He saw the smiles and bows, but not the villainous scowls at his back. Small begging children feigned bad limps and cried with pretended pain as he came near and giggled when he left.

Outside the village a bullock cart was slowly rumbling toward him. The driver was half asleep and in the back was a young man with a strangely pale face who kept grabbing at his black suitcases as the cart tipped into one rut after another. It was the English tutor, uncomfortable, exhausted, and almost ready to take his suitcases and return to England.

But Kedah's thoughts were elsewhere and he turned his horse toward the forest without seeing.

5

Natu felt very alone and heavy with responsibility when the holy man left. Once again it was up to him to make the decisions. He had the old man's last words to guide him. Head north toward the Gir Forest. Avoid the Maharaja's land.

He stored a still smoldering ember from the fire in a clay

pot, adding a few pieces of bark to keep it alive and handing it to Rani to carry. She would see that it didn't die. Sunara took up her bundles and Natu his, and they were on their way.

The extraordinary and delightful state of cleanliness they now enjoyed had surprising results. Other transients on the road greeted them without shuddering away with an "Unclean!" or "Outcastes!" or "Untouchable!" Farmers in the fields didn't guard their precious small horde of seeds at the sight of them. Natu felt a stirring of pride he had never had before. It was apparent that being clean and being away from the Bhangi slum made them undetectable from other poor people.

Sunara's brown face with the large black eyes had an expression of happy expectancy. Rani's thin face looked content in a docile, fatalistic way. Her life was over, suttee or no suttee, and her interests focused on the afterworld. Until her time came she would follow her son and obey him as if he were her husband. Her big black eyes saw nothing of her surroundings. They looked into the realm of reincarnation.

Natu walked in front of the two women as befitted the head of the house. He walked with his head high, no longer slinking, creeping, or hiding. It was a lovely feeling and it showed in his face. He was not above stealing if the necessity arose, but the remembrance of the lizard he had killed made him want to try that way of foraging for his family rather than his former method.

The landscape was changing. Fewer farms were visible and a jungly growth had started to hem in their vision. Rains came and disappeared, the sun burned down for a minute and then hid behind more clouds. Natu and his family were soaked, dried, and soaked, over and over again. They were chilled and overheated. Each night they camped under a spreading tree and built up their precious fire,

sometimes eating from their small supplies and other times munching on wild sugarcane or mangoes. Once they came on an abandoned field and gathered the few peanuts not rooted up by wild pigs.

Often they heard the chattering of monkeys, the grunts of pigs, and the maniacal cries of hyenas. They were all terrifying sounds to the city-bred group. But Natu began to plan on how to capture one of the animals and gathered, as they went along, sticks that could be sharpened into spears and long vines that might be fashioned into snares.

The paths they traveled might have been man-made or perhaps animal-made. They were narrower than they had been. Natu kept on course, roughly, by the sun when it was out and the moon if it shone. Now heavy tropical vegetation in a thousand shades of green shed heat and moisture and smelled of decay.

Occasionally the little party passed over streams. Bird life was endless in its variety. Green parakeets with long green-and-blue tails exploded from trees. Mynah birds arose like arrows shot from the forest. Natu unsuccessfully threw stones at them hoping for a succulent meal. Tall gray cranes with bright-red heads quietly disappeared as they approached.

Natu and his family were never full, but seldom did they suffer the pain of real hunger. The rains had brought forth a great variety of tender shoots, berries, and nuts. They looked carefully to see if birds had eaten some before they dared to sample the unfamiliar food. Natu was becoming clever at catching small animals, so that they fared better than they had in Pathan. And now his aim with stones was improving. Several times a bird or two enriched their pot.

The overhead growth became so thick it appeared to make a never-ending night. Where light penetrated in bright narrow shafts, insects and butterflies flew through them in gaudy flashes of color.

It was in this dark world that they faced their first danger.

Natu, leading as always, had his eyes on the uneven ground hoping to catch something edible for the evening meal. It was oppressive in that deep forest, and he was hurrying to get to an area where the sky could be seen again.

In a tiny patch of sunlight ahead Natu saw a movement. He froze, and Sunara and Rani almost bumped into him. They froze too when they saw the coiled, pale-olive body with its yellow markings. The king cobra was at least twelve feet long. It raised the upper portion of its body straight up off the ground and poised rigidly, staring at Natu with lidless black eyes. A pale-pink forked tongue darted in and out of its mouth. The snake raised its body higher and Natu saw the ribs behind its head spreading to make a hood. The cruel little head arched and the tongue flickered in and out. Then suddenly the snake twisted and hit the ground with a thud and slithered out of sight.

Natu's trembling started after the danger was past. "Lakshmi is certainly with us!" he whispered tremulously.

"Let's get away from here!" Sunara's eyes were enormous pools of fear. "I—we don't want to live in a forest, do we? Do we, Rani?"

Rani only smiled gently and waited for Natu to tell her.

"We'll go on!" Natu said firmly, thinking of the holy man's words, but wondering himself whether it was such a good idea.

To their relief, in a few miles the deep forest thinned to scattered, scrubby trees and when they saw a rushing stream in a sun-filled clearing Natu decided not to go any farther that day.

The sun felt good on their shoulders and they drank from the stream and relaxed in the deep grass.

A crashing sound nearby sent them flying to their feet.

From between the trees a single elephant emerged. On its neck sat a mahout with one foot pressed behind the animal's huge ear. He carried a black umbrella over his head.

Natu looked at him in staring disbelief. Was it possible that people lived in this wild country? His mouth flew open and stayed that way.

"You will have to come with me," the mahout said when he had brought his elephant close.

"Why?" Natu found his voice. "We haven't done anything!"

"The Maharaja does not allow trespassers on his land." The mahout looked stern.

"I—we didn't know it was his land!" Natu's face had paled with horror. The holy man had said to keep away from the Maharaja. "Isn't this the Gir Forest?"

"It is not. Now follow me!"

"But—but the holy man told us to go to the Gir Forest."

"The holy man? He told you?" The mahout looked impressed and rather undecided.

"Please let us go! If you'll just tell us how to get there, we'll travel night and day to get off the Maharaja's land!"

The mahout lowered his umbrella. "A holy man," he repeated stupidly to himself. "A holy man told them. H'mmm." And then without another word he turned his elephant and left.

Natu didn't know whether they were supposed to follow or not, but he knew they had better do something quick. He hustled the two women to the forest edge in the opposite direction from the mahout's and in a few minutes the stream was far behind them.

They found themselves on a wide path now and it made hurrying easier, but Natu had an uneasy feeling that the path might not be leading them away from danger.

His uneasiness was confirmed when a moment later they heard the hoofbeats of a trotting horse coming toward

them. He pushed Rani and Sunara behind a cluster of bushes and was easing himself into another clump when a young man's clear voice called, "What are you doing?"

Natu bravely took a step back onto the path and waited for the horse and rider. He saw a beautiful prancing mount and the youth astride it was the noblest he had ever seen.

"What are you doing in the bushes?" the youth asked. "Are you after game? Poaching is forbidden, you know!"

Natu swallowed hard. "N-no. I'm hiding!"

The young man's face had a kindly, questioning, though rather surprised look. Natu began to feel less frightened.

"We didn't know we were on the Maharaja's land," he said a little shakily, "and we're trying to get off it! We want to go to the Gir Forest."

"We?" The youth looked around.

"My mother and sister and me." Natu beckoned his family to join him.

The young man stared at Sunara, and Natu could see admiration in his eyes. "You're almost there, you know. My father's lands stop just beyond that banyan. Then you're in the Gir Forest."

Natu gasped. This was the Maharaja's son! But he didn't look so fearsome!

"My name is Kedah," said the young prince. "What's yours?"

Once again Natu was aware that cleanliness had kept their low caste hidden. "Natu. And this is Sunara and my mother, Rani."

They heard galloping hooves approaching in the distance and a voice calling, "Kedah!"

"My brother," Kedah said. "Best get back to the bushes." He rode forward at a slow walk.

6

NATU waited until the two mounted brothers had disappeared down the path before he scrambled out of the bushes and started Rani and Sunara toward the banyan. This time he brought up the rear. He hurried the women unmercifully until the banyan was several miles behind them.

The Gir Forest was a vast area of semiarid country with thorn scrub and stunted timber, containing a certain number of teak trees. Sparsely sprinkled through the area were tiny villages, enormous herds of buffalo, deer, wild pigs, and lions. Natu, like every other Indian, knew something about tigers, but he had never heard that lions abounded in the Gir Forest. If he had known, it is possible that he would have ignored the holy man's suggestion that he find his future there.

As Natu and the women left the Maharaja's land, there was a sudden gray chill and then the rain pattered down, growing into a crescendo as torrents beat the forest. In minutes there were new, rushing rivers carving paths into the earth. Uncomfortable as it was, Natu was thankful for the downpour. It showed him where *not* to build their hut and at the same time moistened the mud to a satisfactory consistency for building.

He found a relatively high spot of ground that was shel-

tered by a tree and surrounded by thorn. Quite near was a ravine with a stream at the bottom, and on the other side of the ravine a cliff towered, outlined in bushes against the sky.

"This will do," Natu said when the three had scratched their way through the thorn.

"But it's so far away from everything!" Sunara wailed.

"That's what we wanted!" Natu did his best to sound firm and manly, but there was a frightened little pulse beating in his temples. The quiet of the forest wasn't quiet at all! Lizards rustled the dry leaves, monkeys leaped and chattered, heavier animals broke twigs. There was never a moment of silence. Before, when they had been traveling, the noise of their own passage and their interest in getting away and arriving somewhere had kept the noises at bay.

Natu and Sunara began to make a few efforts at erecting the poles that would make the framework for their new home. Rani fed her little fire and sat, dully looking into the distance, occasionally murmuring to herself.

When the sun started to sink, the forest began to teem with a hidden life that roared from thousands of throats, tiny and large. The din became so loud that Natu had to shout to make himself heard. Every now and then there was a momentary silence after the shriek of some doomed animal. It was as if the brief moment of death sounded a tocsin and all the creatures of the forest must pause for a short spell. Then the roar continued. All night the forest sighed and moaned and cried out in pain.

It was a period of terror for Natu and Sunara. Rani didn't seem to hear the roars and screams. But the morning's bright sunshine put the fright out of mind. Many trips were made between the soft mud in the ravine and their sheltered hummock. Natu made a small path through the thorn, blessing it as he piled the broken branches where he could put them back in place for the next night. He was

sure that the thorn scrub had kept the wild animals away from them and would protect them just as well in the future. A feeling of accomplishment as well as safety suffused him while the walls of their home crept upward.

Sunara's house-building left much to be desired. Lumps and bumps and crevices strangely emerged in every handful of mud she applied. So Natu set his mother to work. She had done this many times before, and although her mind was far away, the mud she handled went on smooth and thick, and not a crack appeared as it dried.

"I'll make us another clay pot then," Sunara said. "I know how to do that, anyway."

By the stream she took a sharp stick and dug up some clay, sprinkled water on it and treaded it with her bare feet until it was just the right consistency. Then she thumped it and molded it slowly into the shape of a bowl with careful, delicate strokes of her brown fingers. Still working it, she brought it up to the fire in front of their new home and buried it in the hot ashes. More hot embers went inside it.

"Natu," she asked, as she sat keeping an eye on her baking pot, "what are those things on the ridge above the stream?"

Natu's eyes left his work and scanned the top of the cliff. He saw a dozen or so animals nibbling on the leaves and grazing on the underbrush. Some had spreading antlers. Natu had no idea what they were, but now was not the time to confess ignorance. "Why, that's our dinner, of course!"

He grabbed up his accumulated lengths of vine and a handful of sharpened sticks and ran.

It was a stiff climb up the side of the cliff and Natu was out of breath when he got to the top. Grazing quite close was one of the deer they had seen. It was far bigger than Natu had supposed and the killing of such an animal was

not possible with his crude weapons. He hid in the bush and watched. Suddenly the deer's head rose sharply, the big ears twitched, and the nose quivered. Then, with a tremendous pound of hooves, a dozen deer bounded away. Natu was wondering if it had been he who had frightened them away when he heard a gurgling, piercing cry. He crawled forward to an opening.

One deer had not been quick enough. Its head lay twisted on its broken neck, and shaking and mauling the dead animal was a large, mangy lioness.

Natu quickly drew back. He had never seen a lioness and he was nervous but curious. He dug himself in deep and watched.

The lioness made a slight noise and from quite close to where Natu was hidden two roly-poly lion cubs crept out of the brush and joined their mother. There was a great lapping of the free-flowing blood, then the lioness opened the belly of the deer, removed the intestines and buried them. Natu was astonished. He watched as the liver and the heart were eaten with obvious relish. Suddenly there was a deep roar and a huge lion walked up to the feasting family with deliberate, purposeful steps. The lioness and her babies immediately left the carcass to their master and walked away.

Now Natu watched the lion tear into the deer. It felt like hours that he had to stay unmoving in the bush.

The lion seemed to have had his fill but didn't leave. He licked his chops and yawned and belched. He lay down and rolled over. He took another superfluous bite. At last he slowly ambled off.

Natu looked carefully to see if the lioness and her cubs were returning. They were not in sight. He had not yet learned that lions prefer their meat a little rotten. If they are not too hungry, they will let their kill ripen for a while before returning to it.

Quietly he crept forward, head turning in all directions, until he had reached the half-eaten deer. With a panicky feeling of eyes upon him, he tore off a partially severed foreleg and ran.

The scramble down the cliffside was fast if not dignified and his entry to the homesite was triumphant. He had done what he had set out to do. He had bagged their dinner! Sunara's eyes glowed with pride in him and even Rani smiled a welcome.

To Natu, who had so little, dignity was important. He was making a home in this wild and unknown country and supplying his family with food. He was a man!

His content was short-lived.

Sunara had gone down to the stream to collect more mud for Rani's plastering. There was the pit they had dug from, but to the left and a little away from the stream, there seemed to be a finer patch, so she went there, carelessly putting a foot into a stand of reeds. She felt a painful sting on her ankle and shrieked out her alarm.

Looking down, she saw that a deadly little snake had taken hold and would not let go. She could feel the heat of the biting, like a flame, running over the length of her foot. She grabbed a rock and pounded on the snake, pounding the wound at the same time.

Natu flew down the hill when he heard her cry and stopped short at the sight of Sunara mashing her ankle with a bloody rock. Then he saw the snake. It took only a matter of seconds for Natu to dispatch the viper, then he turned to Sunara. Her eyes were glazing and Natu could see that her leg was swelling fast. There was only one thing to do.

He set Sunara in the middle of the stream and cut the wound with one of his sharp sticks that he always carried in his dhoti. He let the water flow through the mashed flesh while he pummeled and kneaded it. Sunara's head was dripping with the cold sweat of pain and her brown face was

tinged with green. He moved her upstream to cleaner water when instinct told him that the poison was fouling the water where they were.

In a little while it was over. Sunara lay gasping in great drafts of air, clutching her thigh and arching her back. Tears rolled down her face. She moaned as pain surged through her body and sweat drenched her already soaking sari.

Rani was shocked out of her lethargy when Natu staggered up to the half-built hut with Sunara limp in his arms. Without a word she took the girl from him, tore a piece off her sari, dipped the length of cotton in wood ash and began to poultice the wound.

"We must go home, Natu!" Rani said as she applied layer after layer of wet ashes.

"We are home, Mother!" Natu was shaken but sure of himself. "We left Pathan because—because—" He couldn't bring himself even to mention the rite of suttee.

"My son." Rani's voice had regained its old timbre. Sunara's accident had brought her out of her trance. "You did what you thought was best," she said as she gently wrapped the girl's ankle with a strip of cotton, "but you don't understand. A Hindu widow is accursed. It is because of sins in a former life that her husband is taken!"

Natu looked at his mother with angry disbelief. Sins? His mother sinned? Impossible!

"What in the name of Siva do you mean? How are you cursed? What sin could take my father from you?"

Rani's voice was almost sharp. "That so hideous a fate as widowhood should befall a woman is because of the enormity of her sins in a former incarnation. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't!"

"Natu, please don't be stupid! This disaster that befell our Sunara is because I did not die with my husband, be-

cause I escaped from the funeral pyre, because I have sinned in this life as well as in a former! Now do you see why I must return?"

"No! No, I don't! And the holy man told you so too!"

"I must return, Natu!"

But Sunara's soft groans and unseeing eyes were of more importance to Rani at the moment, and Natu knew she would not leave yet, anyway.

7

"How MANY daughters have I?" the Maharaja asked the minister.

"Seven at the last count, Your Highness!"

"What ages are they?"

"I believe the oldest is eleven and the youngest is not quite two." The minister was pleased to have the information at hand. If he had had to go and count the girl children, the Maharaja would have been most annoyed.

The Prince clucked to himself. "Tsk, tsk! I have been remiss! They should have been married long ago!"

"S-surely not the youngest, sire?"

"Any girl over three has to be married or, at the very least, betrothed. See to it!"

The minister looked worried. "Your Exalted Highness, should I investigate marriages with the sons of the Maharaja of Daflapur?"

"You idiot! Certainly not! You know very well that he is my enemy! Get going and arrange suitable marriages. Let some other prince house and feed these females for a change. You have six months!"

Everyone knew, and few cared, in those days, that parents looked after sons and only God looked after daughters. The Maharaja had particular plans for his sons. He knew that the progeny of child marriages were puny, weak little things and seldom grew to adulthood. "Early to wed, early to die" were his words when approached by other princes about their daughters and his sons. He wanted a strong line of heirs and offspring.

"Your Highness," the minister said, "as long as they are sufficiently exalted does it matter how old the husbands are for your daughters?"

"Not at all!"

"I have heard that Prince Salim, who is fifty-eight, wants a six-year-old wife. Would you, er—"

"Of course," interrupted the Maharaja. "If it's suitable. Any high Brahman, no matter what age. Oh, and while you're about it, give a thought to wives for Ashraf and Kedah. They are quite old enough now. Just remember their position. Use judgment! You, of course, know what awaits you if you fail me."

The cringing minister left.

When Ashraf hailed Kedah in the forest, he had news to impart.

"He's come!" he said as they trotted their horses toward home.

"Who's come?"

"Our tutor. Wait till you see him! He isn't much older than we are. He has a pale-green face and pale-green eyes and pale-yellow hair—the ugliest thing you've ever seen. But he smells all right, and he's very tall. Taller than you or our father or anyone I've ever seen. Oh, yes, he has pale-green hands too!"

Kedah forgot about meeting Natu and his family in the

excitement of something new and different coming into their lives. A green tutor sounded most interesting.

"What's his name?"

"It's as ugly as he is!" Ashraf laughed. "An absurd name. I can't remember it."

When the boys had left their mounts at the stables, changed their clothes, and made ready to meet their tutor, a servant summoned them to their father's chambers.

The doors opened on a surprising scene. A young man was towering above the Maharaja! That was never done. If an individual was unfortunate enough to be taller than the Prince, who sat on an elevated seat, it was customary for that individual to kneel, or, in special circumstances, a chair was offered. A chair *had* been offered, but the young man had been seated in the rolling bullock cart for hours and obviously preferred to stand or pace in front of H. E. H. ignoring the chair.

The boys would have been astounded at what the young man was saying if they had been able to understand English.

"I don't mind their believing in the Vedic gods. I myself find Varuna of the sky, Agni of fire, Surya the sun, and Siva the destroyer, most interesting. Brahma, I believe, is another name for the God I worship, and I'm quite willing to teach them about the Creator. But, Your Highness, I shall not promote the belief that castes are heaven-made!"

The boys watched their father scowl and his eyes become black pinpoints of fire, and then, to their surprise, he smiled.

"We will concern ourselves with English and the classics, young man. Our religious beliefs are not your concern. Now, here are the boys!"

Kedah advanced first. He noticed that the young man was not really green. Rather, a grayish pink-white. The eyes, though, were as Ashraf had said. So was his hair.

The young man met Kedah halfway. He held out his hand. Kedah was confused. He had been prepared to bow, but evidently he was supposed to take the white hand in one of his own. He did and found the grip a pleasantly firm one.

Ashraf hurried up and followed Kedah's example.

The Maharaja looked warningly at the boys so that they were able to control their laughter when the young man's name was told them.

"This is Mister Glen Harris-Towne!"

Lessons began almost immediately. The Maharaja let the tutor settle in his quarters, but after unpacking, he had to meet the boys in the classroom. There was little communication between them. Glen knew a few words in Hindustani, and the boys had a few impractical English words such as "skittles," "sweater," and "rugby." The Maharaja had given orders that nothing but English would be spoken to his sons, not even at mealtime. If one of them wanted a second helping of curry, he would go without unless he asked for it in English. It was remarkable how quickly they learned.

Glen learned too. Of the vast palace staff only three or four could speak a foreign language. So, as the boys learned English, he learned Hindustani. He learned other things too. Things that were horrible to his free soul. The caste system, for instance. Brahmans believed that the outcastes deserved their dreadful existence because they were terrible sinners in a past incarnation and deserved neither sympathy nor help while they worked out their curse on earth. The youthful impatience of the tutor made him want to reform the Indians. Not in the next century, not next year, but now! He tried to explain to his charges how all men are born equal. His orations fell on unbelieving ears. It was patently absurd even to think that given a chance the untouchables could equal the Brahmans!

Kedah, in his halting and broken English, did his best to explain to the tutor that even if the outcastes were given equal opportunity, they wouldn't take it. They knew, just as well as anybody else, that unless they lived this life as they were born to it, their next incarnation would be no better.

Ashraf merely laughed at his teacher's strange ideas.

It was a different life for them all. Neither boy had the freedom he had had before, doing or going what or where he wanted. It was equally confining for Glen Harris-Towne. The Maharaja insisted that the three of them stay together, whether studying, eating, horseback riding, or walking, until his sons were fluent in their new language.

Kedah was interested and learned quickly. Ashraf was not interested but learned quickly too. It had been some time since he had visited his pretty little cousin in purdah, and the quicker he learned this hideous tongue the sooner he would be free to pursue his own interests.

One day the boys and their tutor rode through one of the villages. Kedah realized that it was a day upsetting to Glen, although the reasons were obscure to the Indian boy. Glen first saw the pond and admired its prettiness with the water lilies growing in profusion. Then he saw the village women washing their clothes in it, children playing in the mud on the banks and throwing the mud into it, cows standing hip deep in it, and people drinking from it.

Glen cried out in horror at such lack of sanitation and was confronted by a shrug of indifference from Ashraf and a look of baffled surprise from Kedah. Before Glen could expound on hygiene, his eyes met another sight that quickly put the pond out of his mind.

There were Muslim men slaughtering goats by the road-side. That they had been at it for some time was apparent from the carcasses that were hung in trees and covered with black flies. Discarded scraps of fat and bone were

thrown onto the road to be screamed and fought over by hawks, dogs, and vultures. There was an angry hum from flying and crawling insects fighting for their share. Soon the meat would be cut up and taken to market.

"But—but—" Glen could hardly speak. "Don't they know about the parasites that will infect them when they eat the meat?"

The boys were not interested.

"We don't eat meat," Kedah said.

"Only dirty Muslims and—and—" Ashraf began and then stopped in embarrassment.

"And the British, you were about to say?" Glen asked. "I can promise you I will never eat meat in this country!" As a matter of fact, he hadn't missed it at all in his stay at the palace. He found the curries and endless variety of fruit, vegetables, and grain very satisfying.

As they were riding home, Glen tried again to interest the boys in reform of the Prince's villages. He explained the diseases that come from polluted water, and he thought he could see a glimmer of interest in Kedah's eyes. But the horses started suddenly to rear and paw the air and then run at a dead gallop. The three young men were astounded at such unseemly behavior, and their hands and minds were busy trying to control the racing mounts.

"W-what's the matter with them?" Glen shouted.

He was not answered, because all of them were thrown off at almost the same time into the muddy ruts of the road while the horses madly galloped on.

Kedah felt a tremor in the earth. There was a sudden hush from the birds and insects. The perfect quiet made the youths uneasy as they got to their feet.

Then the ground heaved and shuddered under them.

"Earthquake!" Glen gasped.

Kedah smiled at him pityingly. "It's only the elephants shifting a bit," he said.

"Elephants! What are you talking about? There are no elephants here!"

Ashraf said, "Kedah, he doesn't know that the earth is supported on the backs of elephants and when they move it's what he calls an earthquake!"

Both boys looked at Glen with condescending tolerance. The poor tutor couldn't help his ignorance!

The tremors ceased as suddenly as they had begun.

Glen sighed as they started their walk to the palace. There were so many things to teach the sons of His Exalted Highness.

8

PURANSING stopped still and quivered when she felt the earth tremor, but it was of short duration and she continued her unhurried pacing. Every day the cheetahs were exercised, but her long legs ached with the desire to stretch in a real run. Her thick tail, which acted as a rudder in the sharp turns of a hunt, twitched irritably. Her head, seemingly too small for her leopard-sized body, was held elegantly high, but the round ears lay flat, showing impatience. It was time for a hunt.

She stopped her pacing and made a high canarylike chirp. The chirps were for familiars only. She had an assortment of snarls, yowls, and spits, but the chirp was used for calling cubs, speaking to other cheetahs, and asking for attention from humans.

Kedah and Glen entered the stables still in the clothes muddied from their falls off the horses and a little breathless from their long walk home.

"You must get to know Puransing," Kedah was saying. "Now that we're getting ready for the hunt."

Kedah watched Glen as he looked at the cheetahs. He guessed what Glen must be thinking. The cheetahs' springing, swinging legs, at first sight, seem too long. Their heads seem too small for their hump-necked, swaybacked, pinch-waisted bodies. But Kedah knew that when the cats turned their elegantly unhurried heads toward them and looked through and past them with large orange eyes, Glen, and anybody else, would forget first impressions. These were the most beautiful animals in the world. Kedah was sure that Glen would soon know that.

"I've been wanting to ask," Glen said, "why you hunt when none of you eats meat?"

"In the first place," Kedah answered, "it's the sport. Then we must have meat for the cheetahs, you know. Also, my father has some Muslim friends—well, not friends exactly, but business relationships, and a gift of a few stags keeps the connections pleasant. The cheetahs are trained not to mangle their kill. They know they'll be rewarded with a cup of fresh blood from the victim's throat."

"I don't see how they can kill such big animals," Glen said. "Puransing's jaw looks weak, and her teeth are so small!"

"You'll see when we're hunting. At least I hope you'll see. They're so fast! I'll tell you, though, so you'll know what to expect. You're right about the weak jaw. In the wild, cheetahs aren't able to protect their kills. Even hyenas can drive them off! They hunt by sight, in daylight. They'll walk or trot aimlessly and you think the last thing they're interested in is a deer. But when one member of a herd is picked out, the cheetah will gently increase its pace and suddenly explode with everything it has in twenty-five-foot bounds. Then it'll knock the deer off stride by hitting the hind legs, enough of a blow to send it staggering, and

finally the cheetah will pounce on it and kill it with one bite in the throat."

Kedah was stroking Puransing. "They're the gentlest of all the big cats, but awfully high-strung and easily upset. They give up easily, you know. If they don't succeed in getting their prey, they lie down and sulk. And even though they run so fast, they can't sustain their speed."

Glen put out a tentative hand toward the cheetah. She neither cringed nor welcomed his caress. He fingered the jeweled collar and wondered what the pretty blue stones were.

"Of course I've read about them," Glen said. "And I've seen Egyptian paintings of cheetahs on leashes dating back to twenty-five hundred years before Christ. I'll have to tell you about Christ someday. I guess cheetahs have been the pets and playthings of royalty for thousands of years. Do you suppose it's because they're so amiable and mild-mannered? Well, Kedah, let's go find your brother. He should have been with us. Your father gave strict orders for us to stay together!"

Puransing resumed her restless pacing as they left. It was certainly time for a hunt.

Kedah suspected that Ashraf had enjoyed his few minutes of freedom from the trio. A hurried trip behind the purdah screen would have whetted his appetite for more. In a rare confidential moment Ashraf had told Kedah about his pretty cousin who preened herself endlessly in front of a polished mirror, turning her head this way and that, and how it had pleased him that she had dropped the mirror in the excitement of seeing him. But now Ashraf saw his brother and Glen coming toward the palace. Kedah saw him as he left the women's quarters by a back way, undoubtedly hoping that when Glen and Kedah met him he would be innocently ambling.

"Well, where have you been? I suppose it's time for lessons again?" Ashraf asked. When Glen nodded he added gloomily, "It always is!"

No sooner had they arrived at the classroom and got out their books than they were interrupted. A servant bowed low.

"Your Highnesses! Sahib! The Prince says that the hunt will be tomorrow. Koonki is no longer needed with the wild elephants. Tomorrow morning, Your Highnesses!"

Studying was out of the question then. Glen tried to interest the boys in a not-too-complicated mathematical problem and when that didn't work, he read aloud to them from Plato. But their eyes were far away and soon Glen was forced to give up.

"We'll play ball," he said. "Lessons will begin again after the hunt."

The exercise was a release from the tense excitement the boys felt, and it passed the time until they had their dinner and went to bed.

It was a cloudy morning the next day when Koonki, adorned with silver cloth and a howdah on her back, was led to the palace door. The horses were already there, the hooded cheetahs were being held on leashes by their attendants, Puransing was seated on a velvet cushion in the palanquin, which was carried by four men. Her hood was jeweled. The boys and Glen were restlessly walking up and down, glancing at the door through which the Maharaja would appear. They must not mount their horses until he was settled and comfortable in the howdah.

They knew he was coming when a dozen servants ran out with their arms full of cushions, robes, skins of wine, sweetmeats, and a water pipe. The Maharaja traveled in comfort.

When he did emerge, he was a glorious sight to behold.

His sparkling white turban was adorned with an enormous star sapphire, his cloak was of cloth of gold, his fingers were loaded with heavy jewels.

Kedah saw that to Glen it was an extraordinary sight. Glen had told the boys about fox hunts in England where one simply went after the fox and dined and rested later. All eyes watched as the Maharaja got ready to mount his elephant.

The mahout on Koonki's neck prodded her with his long, hooked pole and she lumbered down onto her knees. Then the servants stowed their burdens in and around the howdah and turned to the Prince who was waiting. Two of the men made steps with their backs, others climbed onto the elephant to pull His Exalted Highness, and the rest pushed from behind. At last he was settled. Cushions were tucked around him and robes were placed on his legs.

Everyone held his breath as the elephant got to her feet, the howdah leaning perilously backward and forward, but the Prince was secure and nodded to his sons to mount.

They were off.

The cheetahs and their keepers went first. The Maharaja on his elephant came next, followed by the three youths on their mounts. At the end of the line were dozens of men, on foot, carrying skinning knives and poles to carry the kill.

It was a jungle that they entered, warm, green, and dark. Their passage through it was immediately concealed by the thick foliage springing back into place, showing no clue that it had been opened. Their steps were cushioned by the debris that matted the forest floor. There were tall tangles of fern, alive with lizards. A million sounds, impossible to identify, battered their ears. Beetles, as big as mice, scuttered across their path. Frogs shrilled. Overhead, when they could see through the roof of leaves, the sky continued to roil. But if the rain had started, none of the hunters knew it. The jungle sheltered them well.

The boys and Glen watched the relaxed prince nibbling sweetmeats and sipping wine and occasionally shouting an order to the cheetah keepers.

At last the jungle thinned to scrub forest and then to an almost open plain. The Maharaja told his mahout to stop. The riders behind came up beside the elephant and the walkers stayed in place.

"This is where the hunt will begin," Kedah whispered to Glen.

"You mean we just sit here? We don't hunt?"

"If the sambar or chital are not sighted in a minute, we'll go farther. But no, we don't do the hunting. The cheetahs do."

The deer must have come in sight, for almost at the same moment the keepers unleashed the cheetahs and removed their hoods. Puransing's palanquin was lowered to the ground and she pulled strongly at her leash, dragging her keepers and the palanquin behind her.

It took a few seconds for the cheetahs' eyes to become accustomed to the light and then they walked sedately toward a stand of bush. They looked innocuously slow as they got within striking distance, but their pace increased to a trot as the heads of the deer jerked up in alarm. Like a burst of shot the deer exploded out of the bush and the chase was on.

The cheetahs were effortlessly ranging alongside their chosen prey and one by one each increased its speed and cut out its victim from the rest. In a matter of seconds the deer and the cheetahs were out of sight.

The Maharaja signaled to advance.

Kedah could see that Glen didn't think much of this way of hunting. There was no human action at all for him to see, and it was a disappointment that the cheetahs were out of sight when they made their kill. He whispered to the boys that it wasn't that he liked the idea of killing, but it

would have been of interest, in this dullest of dull hunts, to see the slim beasts, the heaviest of them weighing one hundred and twenty pounds, kill an animal far bigger with one stroke. Kedah and Ashraf thought their tutor a bit peculiar to wish to participate in the action that was only for animals or servants.

As they rode along they saw fallen sambar with their throats severed and cheetahs patiently awaiting their reward. In some areas the chase was still going on. In others, defeated cheetahs were sitting disgruntledly with narrowed eyes.

Ten deer had been slaughtered and the men with knives and poles got to work. The cheetah keepers began collecting their charges. The hunt was over and the rain let loose in wild abandon.

The Maharaja was reasonably protected under the howdah top, but he pulled his robes up to his chin. The boys on their horses were immediately soaked, and the cheetahs looked like drenched rags.

They were turning to go home when it became known that Puransing was missing.

"You will all stay here until she is found!" the Maharaja thundered. He stopped the men who were skinning and poling. "Every inch of ground will be covered! Now!"

The herd of sambar had disappeared. Kedah thought it likely that Puransing had followed. He and Ashraf and Glen galloped their horses through the pelting rain in the direction where they had last seen the herd.

The men on foot examined each clump of bush and searched through the tall grass. The Maharaja, in a raging fury, wiggled in his howdah and gave contradictory orders to his confused mahout. "Go to the left! Go to the right! Turn back! Hurry up! Slow down! What's the matter with you? Can't you do anything right?"

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The men had ranged almost out of sight, beating the grass and bushes and calling Puransing by name.

The three youths came back. They had reached the herd, but seeing that the deer were grazing calmly, they knew that no cheetah was near.

The Prince ordered them to search again. The men on foot slowly came back, discouraged and afraid of the Maharaja's wrath. Despite their exhaustion, they were made to return to their brush-beating.

Hours passed and not a sign of Puransing was found.

9

SUNARA was ill for days. The snake poison had constricted her lungs, so that she gasped for every breath, and the sight of her eyes was blurred. Rani nursed with tenderness and some skill, and gradually the wound on Sunara's ankle healed, her chest resumed its normal rhythm, and she was able to use her eyes.

Natu had finished the walls of the hut and thatched it with branches, leaves, and rice straw. He sought, and found, buffalo droppings to preserve the mud and then busied himself with keeping their larder full.

An unexpected treat had come to them when Natu had followed a flight of bees to a hole in a boulder. He had been badly stung, but the honey he brought home made up for any hurt he had suffered. It was delicious.

He found a patch of wild rice, which Rani successfully ground and pounded to make chapaties.

And he was always on the alert for the kills of the lions. Having stolen a foreleg of a deer once, he was sure he could do it again. It had made a tasty stew.

One day he was on a foraging expedition, keeping near the stream in the ravine. Many small animals lived close to the source of water and occasionally he had speared one or snared another with his tough vines. He kept a roving eye on the top of the cliff too. It had been there that he had stolen the foreleg.

Natu walked and scrambled over boulders for a long time with no success. It was when he looked up at the cliff top that he saw vultures quietly circling in the sky with not a wing-flap to disturb their watchful vigil.

As he followed the stream he saw the vultures flying lower in ever-decreasing circles. They seemed to be eyeing something in or near the stream bed, and Natu hurried to get there before they did.

He came around a bend and saw what was attracting the scavengers. A large sambar was dead and half submerged in the water. Natu was wondering why the vultures had not already descended when he saw the reason.

An animal, looking something like a lion, he thought, except for the spots, was tightly wound up in strong liana vines and suspended several feet off the ground. It was easy to see what had happened from the torn bushes on the cliffside. The big cat had attacked the deer too close to the edge and they had both catapulted down. Although the deer was dead, the cat was very much alive. Each time a vulture sailed too near the earth, menacing snarls from the entrapped animal sent the bird flapping upward again.

Natu wasn't interested in the big cat except to be sure she couldn't attack him when he dismembered the deer, but a strange sound came to his ears. It was a small, gentle chirping. He looked around for a bird in the bush, but soon

saw that the noise was coming from the cat. She seemed to be talking to him.

He walked closer to the entangled animal and saw that her eyes were huge, long-lashed, and very beautiful. In them were fear and hurt and pleading. A new feeling was born and started to pulse in Natu's heart.

Very slowly he approached the cat, making sure at every step that she could not suddenly free herself and pounce on him. More of the soft chirping did something to reassure him, so he climbed to within a few feet of the trapped cat.

A vulture settled in a nearby tree. Its featherless head with the sharp steellike beak that could rip through a skull in one strike, and its cold, bleak eyes followed his every move. Natu turned suddenly, clapping his hands and roaring at the bird. The vulture took off, showing its eight-foot wingspread, but settled again in a neighboring scrub. There was a heavy fluttering and Natu saw that two more vultures had alighted in nearby trees, all watching with cruel, beady eyes.

Natu felt the terror that drives both predators and prey alike in a desire for panicked flight. Fright, like violence, is contagious, and the cat started struggling, entangling herself more in frenzied exertion, jabbing herself on a rock and tearing her skin.

It was strange, then, that Natu forgot his own fear and horror of the disgusting birds and started talking softly to the cat, reassuring her in gentle tones. He was glad when the animal quieted and turned her head to lick the blood that was oozing from the wound.

Natu turned frequently to eye the vultures, to make sure that they were stationary on their perches. His heart was beating fast when he put a tentative hand out to the cat, not quite touching her, but skirting the edges of the ears.

His last fear of the animal left when she chirped again and looked at him with confidence. His hand rested for a moment on the small head and a surge of sympathy ran through him.

Quickly he sawed through the vines with his sharpened rock, breaking them when they showed a weakened place, tearing at them with his hands, and sometimes biting in two a particularly tough strand. As he worked he saw that the cat wore a collar of blue stones. She must belong to someone and undoubtedly would go home when Natu freed her. But first, before the last vine was severed, Natu undid the collar and wound it up in his dhoti. At last he had a bracelet for his mother! It would wind twice around her wrist and wasn't really as pretty as the blue glass bangle he had dreamed of for her, but it would do.

The cat jumped free, down to the stream, where she lapped water in a terrible thirst.

"You can go home now," Natu said.

To his surprise, the big cat folded up her long legs and lay down by the stream, watching him with her orange eyes. The tear in her shoulder was still bleeding and once in a while she licked at it.

Natu was a bit frightened of getting close to the cat now that she was free. But he wanted to get at the deer, to wrench a leg off and then to leave it to the waiting vultures, and the deer was very close to the cat. So, cautiously, he approached. He saw her lick her lips. He didn't know that she was patiently waiting for the cup of blood that had always been her reward, and it made him nervous to have her expectant eyes following him.

He started working on the foreleg. A hind leg would have been better but altogether too tough to get off the body. His sharp stone helped cut the fibers and he used his sticks as probes and levers.

Puransing, for it was she that Natu had rescued, stirred

restlessly. Clearly this person wasn't going to give her her reward and seemed to have forgotten her. She moved closer. He was still too busy pulling at the leg to notice. She nosed him and he jumped with fright. But then he saw that she had no plans to hurt him.

"I suppose you're hungry, aren't you?" He put his foot on the carcass and gave a great jerk which sent him rolling when the leg came free. "All right! It's your turn! *You* have some now!" He waved the cat on. She just looked at him.

"Well, surely you don't expect me to feed you by hand, do you?"

It was apparent that she did.

"Here," he said. "Come on! You can do it easier than I can."

The big cat looked at him.

Natu kicked the carcass. "This is for you, don't you understand?"

Suddenly understanding came to her. She tore into the deer, lapping the blood and then opening the belly.

Natu observed that she was an untidy eater. She didn't bury the entrails as the lions did. But she did one thing that Natu was thankful for. One of the haunches was torn off as she worried the abdomen to get at the liver. He picked it up and added it to the foreleg, neatly wrapping them in leaves and tying the bundle with vines.

The vultures had flapped nearer. Natu started home.

It seemed a long way with the heavy meat to carry. The stream gurgled and tinkled and he stopped frequently to drink.

After what seemed endless miles, he saw in the distance Rani helping Sunara to bathe her wound. He called and they looked up. Sunara waved and then after a paralyzed pause she screamed. Rani screamed too.

Natu wondered what could have frightened the women as he started to run toward them.

"Behind you!" Rani screeched. "Look behind you!"

Natu turned. There behind him was the big cat he had rescued, trotting placidly and following as close as if he had had her on a leash. He stopped.

The women watched in frozen terror as the cat came up to him.

"Why don't you go home?" Natu said.

Puransing chirped.

"Oh, well, come on then!" He raised his voice for the women. "This is a pet! You don't have to be afraid!"

Telling them was one thing, convincing them was another. As Natu and Puransing approached, the women fled up the hill to the hut, shrieking wildly and stumbling in their haste.

"You wait here," Natu said firmly to the cat when they were outside of the thorn hedge. He went up to the hut calling, "It's all right! Don't worry!" but as he entered the low door, the cat entered too.

Rani pushed Sunara into a corner and covered the girl with her own trembling body, her eyes bulging with fear.

Puransing sighed deeply, lay down and put her head on her paws as if to say, "Home at last!"

Natu laughed. "Don't you see, Mother, that she's a pet? Come now, pat her like I do!" He caressed her head and body and the cat sighed again in deep contentment.

It took a lot of urging to get Rani to come close to the big cat, but Sunara, after the initial fright, joined Natu in fondling her. Puransing was getting the attention she craved, and when she rolled over on her back, exposing her tender, white belly, even Rani dared to touch her. Rani saw the wounded shoulder and, still wary and nervous, applied a mixture of mud and ashes to it. With that medical attention, Rani's last fear departed. The warm orange eyes

of the cheetah showed her that the cat was indeed a pet.

This was a very new experience for all three of them. In Pathan, where starving pye-dogs abounded, they had never thought of the animals as anything but a part of the usual dreary scenery. They had had no feeling of sadness for them. Nobody had. They were all too occupied in trying to keep themselves alive, keeping starvation at bay, and if anyone ever thought of the dogs, it was either in competition for a scrap of food or to be glad the dogs cleaned up rotting matter in the lanes. But now, in all three hearts a new feeling was stirring. The family looked at Puransing and a strange gladness whispered through their inner beings.

"I have a present for you!" Natu said to his mother, unrolling the cat's collar from his dhoti. The blue stones glowed prettily. "I wanted a glass bangle for you, but this will have to do!"

Rani's eyes swam with tears. It was the first gift she had ever received. Wordless, she held out her hand for it. Natu wrapped it twice around her wrist and Rani found her voice.

"It—it's big enough to make two bangles," she said. "Can we cut it in half so that Sunara—"

Natu thought it a fine idea and as he was struggling to get the collar divided, Puransing watched with sleepy eyes.

"We'll have to name her," he said. The women were preparing the meat he had brought home. Some of it was cut into strips and buried in hot ashes to smoke and preserve. The rest went into the stewpot.

"How about Selang? That's a nice name," Sunara suggested. "Or Parta Sing?"

Natu shook his head. The collar was almost apart now and he used his teeth to sever the rest. "Try again," he said as he used his tough vines to bind up each half into a bracelet.

"Biniram? Thapa? Sahabir? Naik?"

"None of those names fits," Natu said. "Look at her! She's a funny-looking animal! We need a funny name! What about Pung?"

So the Maharaja's favorite, the cherished and doted-upon Puransing, became Pung and she seemed quite happy about it.

10

"Natu," Sunara sounded wistful, "remember what fun we used to have stealing in the bazaar?"

"I remember," Natu answered. "If you could call it fun! We were in danger of being caught all the time and we never, never had enough to eat!"

"It was exciting, though! It's so dull here!"

"Dull! Dull with lions prowling near, never knowing if they'll jump the thorn and come after us? Dull having to hunt every day wondering if you'll get to the kill before some fierce animal beats you to it? I don't think it's at all dull!"

"You do the hunting, Natu, and have the excitement. All Rani and I do is pound rice and cook and sweep and keep the fire alive. It's a dull life and I miss all the people that lived close to us in Pathan."

Natu didn't know that he was listening to a complaint that all females all over the world expressed from time to time. He was surprised and hurt. In the beginning, when their hut was just finished, it was different. Both Rani and Sunara had been busy and happy getting the interior livable. The nesting instinct was strong in both women. But

after everything had been done, there had been a slump. Rani had not talked again of leaving, but she drifted around aimlessly, her mind evidently far away. Sunara was restless to the point of irritation. She had even called Pung a no-good pest, which was clearly unfair! Pung helped Natu with his hunting, several times killing a wild pig for their pot, and often showing him where small game was hidden. Of course, Pung's appetite was vast and the women complained that she ate more than all three of them did. Actually, despite the complaints, both women were very fond of the amiable cat and seldom passed her without a kindly pat.

As for Natu, his devotion to Pung overshadowed all his other emotions. As they lived closely together, Natu began to think of the pye-dogs in Pathan and to wonder if, with a little food and attention, they could have been made pets of too. It was fruitless thinking, he knew. In the first place, there were too many of them and in the second, not enough food.

"You're not saying you want to go back to Pathan, are you?" Natu's voice was accusative.

"W-well, not exactly." Sunara looked to Rani for help. "We sort of miss it, don't we, Rani? If there was something to do here, something exciting, you know—"

"Mother"—Natu turned to Rani—"do you need excitement too?"

"No, my son."

Natu was relieved. At least one of his women behaved sensibly.

"Do you want to hunt with Pung and me?" Natu asked Sunara.

"Oh, Natu! Yes! Yes, I do! I promise I won't get in the way! Remember I was a help to you in the bazaar?"

"It's quite a bit different here, Sunara, but all right. I'll take you along. Carry some of these sticks and this roll of

vine and promise me you'll do just as I say, when I say it!"

They made an interesting-looking party. Natu and Pung walked side by side, Pung pacing like a contented hunting dog and Natu looking like a young warrior, his black hair shining and his alert eyes darting in all directions. Sunara followed closely, a little frightened as they left familiar territory, eyes enormous in her brown face.

Natu turned to check on her frequently, motioning her not to talk whenever she opened her mouth and nodding assurance when he felt she needed it.

He went to a more graded ascent up the cliff than he was in the habit of taking when by himself. He took Sunara's hand and pulled her up. It was the first time she had been on the plateau. The plain stretched endlessly before her and the sun broiled down in merciless fury. The monsoon season had ended and the earth had begun to show the ravages of a burning and pitiless heat.

In the ravine far below them they could see the stream, shrinking in size now but still rippling. Up here on the plain the dried grass rustled in the scorching breath of wind and the baked earth seemed dead.

"I don't like it here, Natu!" Sunara whispered.

"I didn't think you would," Natu whispered back. "Be quiet now! Watch Pung!"

Pung had seen something. Deliberately and slowly she left Natu's side and stalked up to a thicket of dusty brush.

There was an alarmed crash and a pounding of hooves and a small deer leaped into the air and came down running.

Pung, at an easy trot, ranged alongside the galloping deer, then Natu and Sunara saw the deer put on a burst of speed and Pung exploded into twenty-foot bounds.

The chase disappeared in clouds of dust.

"What do we do now?" Sunara asked.

"We wait for a minute, then follow."

The sky was brassy in the intolerable white heat of noon

and the breeze came in furnacelike blasts. Sunara thought of the clear, cool stream and the mud hut shady in the shelter of the tree and wished she were back there.

"Come on," Natu said.

They advanced far enough to see the kill through the roiling dust. The deer crashed to the earth, somersaulting, its antlers digging into the ground, causing it to tumble head over heels. The breaking of the neck bones could be heard for quite a distance.

"We'll let Pung have her fill and then I'll get what we need." Natu put a sympathetic hand on Sunara's shoulder. He could feel her discomfort and nervousness. "This is the dangerous part when other animals come to investigate. Are you sure you want to come with me?"

Sunara shook her head. "Can I go home now?"

"If you think you can find the way."

"Oh, yes, Natu! I know how to get home."

Natu watched her disappear into the brush that grew near the cliff edge. He knew that once she had scrambled down to the stream she would have no trouble locating their hut.

He walked slowly toward Pung, who was feasting. He had learned the habits of his big cat. She must eat where she killed, not being strong enough to drag the carcass to a protected place. Also, cheetahs refuse rotten meat. It had to be a fresh kill, eaten now, or they wouldn't eat at all. So he took his time, peered into bushes that might hide hyenas, looked at the sky for the vultures that would appear quickly, and kept a wary lookout for lions.

Pung had finished her repast when Natu arrived at her side. She settled down to watch him as he hacked at the partially dismembered body. Natu had become rather expert with sharpened rocks and sticks. He had found the easiest places to cut into a carcass.

When Pung gave a startled snarl and trotted quickly

away, Natu was too engrossed in his work to pay attention. The haunch was almost free of the body, flies had started to settle and to bother him. He was aware, without looking, that vultures were sailing overhead, and the sun baked uncomfortably on his back. One or two more cuts and the haunch would be his.

Natu heard a roar. Starting, he saw a lioness in the act of springing upon him. There was not even time to dodge. The lioness caught Natu's shoulder as she sprang and they both crashed to the ground. Growling horribly, the lioness shook Natu the way a cat does a mouse. It was strange that the shock produced a stupor in the boy. There was no pain or terror. In a state of dreaminess he looked at the beast and noted that one ear was torn.

This peculiar state of partial anesthesia is perhaps produced in all victims attacked by predators. If so, it is a merciful lessening of the pain.

In a moment Natu became aware that the lioness had stopped shaking him; in fact was nowhere to be seen. The wound in his shoulder suddenly pained with such ferocity that he gasped and blacked out.

He awoke to a feeling of stiffness rather than pain and in his return to consciousness realized that being beside the deer carcass was perilous. Where the lioness had gone and why she had stopped mauling him were questions of indifference at present. He was alive and if he wished to stay that way he had better move.

There was a thicket not too far away. He started crawling toward it. Dimly a question repeated itself, might not the lioness have hidden in there too? His progress was slow. The wounded shoulder made his motions crablike.

He heard an unfamiliar noise, then more noises, and suddenly he knew why the lioness had been frightened away. There were people, people and horses, people and

elephants, and their voices were getting closer, calling and chirping, swearing, and asking Lakshmi for help.

Natu made a tremendous effort, spurred on by fear, and managed to make the thicket. But the stiffness in his shoulder had been replaced by severe pain and the world turned black again.

Shortly he knew he was either dreaming or dead. There was a pale face above his and the pale mouth was forming words. He paid the words no attention because this—this person didn't, couldn't, exist. There just couldn't be a human with a skin that color! Had he been reborn into a pale-fleshed world? He glanced at his own arm. It was still brown.

Pain surged through him again and he writhed away from the white hands that were on his shoulder.

"Deep slashes"—the pale mouth worked again—"but no ligaments torn or bones broken. Let's see if you can get to your feet."

Natu let himself be helped up. The white hands were strong and gentle and steadied him when he tottered.

"Now, where do you live? I'll have to help you get there. I'll call some of the others to assist." At Natu's look of alarm the pale one added, "Well, the others that were hunting with me seem to have gone out of sight anyway. Now tell me where you live."

Natu nodded in the direction of the ravine. Words wouldn't come. He still couldn't believe in his rescue or his rescuer. He indicated, by pointing, that he wouldn't leave without his haunch. The pale face looked curious. "You're Muslim then?" he asked. "You eat meat?"

Natu shook his head and nodded it, leaving his questioner no wiser than he had been.

"My name is Glen Harris-Towne. What's yours?"

Natu's voice came out choked and thready. "Natu."

"Well, Natu, I'll carry your meat and you lean on me. I hope it's not far. My horse seems to have gone home without me."

They slowly made their way through the brush to the cliff, then along the edge to the less precipitate incline by which Natu and Sunara had come. It was difficult going. Natu's shoulder was in a shockingly painful state and that arm was quite useless. Glen had to support the boy as well as carry the heavy haunch, and exhaustion hit him when at last they reached the stream. He buried his face in the shallow trickle.

Natu lay down in the water, letting the sluggish current wash away the blood and cleanse the wound.

Suddenly Glen sat up. Alertness and fright were visible on his pale face.

"There's something trailing us," he whispered to Natu. "Something big, I think. I saw a long tail go behind that boulder!"

Natu seemed to come to himself at last. A smile touched his lips. "I think it's Pung," he said. "Pung! Come here, Pung!"

To Glen's astonishment a tawny head and orange eyes appeared around the rock, then the whole, long body, the spots blending in with the dappled light and shade. It wove its deliberate way to the stream.

"Why, it's Puransing!" Glen exclaimed. "When I saw that trail of blood and found you, it was she I expected to see! We were all looking for Puransing and it just happened that I was nearest to you. The Maharaja has offered a reward for her. Everybody's searching."

Natu looked troubled.

"This—this is Pung," he said. "She's mine and I—I love her. Do you have to— Do you need to tell the Maharaja— Must you—"

"If it were just up to me, I'd say keep her. But let me tell

you, Natu. The Maharaja has offered a reward, yes, but along with that goes a threat. Anyone hiding the cheetah, keeping her away from her rightful home, is to be imprisoned or beheaded or both. The Prince is a vengeful man!"

Natu's head drooped. "The holy man told us to keep away from the Maharaja," he mused. "But," he brightened, "surely nobody would come this far, looking, would they? Couldn't I keep her here below the cliff and no one would find her? Couldn't I?"

"They would find her eventually, Natu. The Maharaja won't let the searching stop, and every day parties go farther afield."

Pung sedately walked to the two young men, making chirping sounds as she came. Glen watched as Natu put his arm around her neck. He became aware that something was missing. Her collar!

"Natu," he said, "Puransing had a collar. Only recently I found out that the collar was made with star sapphires. I don't suppose you know anything about it?"

Natu had not been a thief for nothing, and along with thievery went great facility for lying. He would have to keep this improbable-looking young man away from his women, who wore their pretty blue bangles all the time. It was really too bad, because he was beginning to like him despite his odd color. Natu's eyes became very innocent.

"No," he said. "When Pung found me and started living at my home, there was no collar."

Natu could see that Glen had doubts as to the truth of the statement.

"Ah, well, then, let me see you safely home. I'm very sorry, but I'll have to take Puransing back with me. I'll promise to bring you the reward and not to tell where I found the cheetah."

Natu was alarmed. "Oh, no, thank you! I can get home

by myself now and—and I don't want any reward!" He looked sharply at the pale one and hoped he had been convincing. It was true that he didn't want a reward, but more true that he didn't want anyone coming to his part of the Gir Forest.

With Natu's reluctant and unhappy help, Glen made a collar and leash with the tough vine that Natu always carried, and he and Puransing departed with a few backward looks at the despondent boy.

11

NATU had a vast, empty, lost feeling as he struggled up the hill and through the thorn with his haunch and without his cat.

Rani smiled a greeting. "Where is Sunara?" she asked. "Playing with Pung somewhere?"

Natu forgot his painful shoulder, forgot the loss of his cheetah, forgot the pale-faced stranger.

"She should have been home hours ago!" he exclaimed. "I showed her how to get to the stream! She couldn't have lost her way! Sunara!" His voice broke like an adolescent's. "Sunara! Are you playing a trick on us? Sunara, answer me!"

"She'll show up, my son. What happened to your shoulder?"

"Never mind my shoulder! I must find her! It'll be dark soon, Mother! How frightened she must be, alone and unprotected!"

"I will fix your shoulder first." Rani was firm. "Sunara has Pung with her, hasn't she?"

"No!" Natu told his mother what had happened since they had left the hut that morning. "Hurry, hurry, Mother! I have to go!" He wiggled impatiently as the usual application of wet ashes was plastered on his torn shoulder. He saw that Rani's hands were trembling now.

"Go, my son! May the gods go with you! Oh, I knew that we should never have left Pathan! Oh, my children, my dear, brave children! Hurry, Natu, hurry!" she called after him as he whisked through the thorn and down to the stream. The stream might give him a clue. He thought of the snakebite Sunara had suffered. What if the same thing had happened and he had not been near enough to hear her cry for help! He pictured her small brown body in the last convulsions before the poison reached the heart and felt his own heart convulse in fear.

Natu started his search near the ascent up the cliff where he supposed she must have come down. He saw his own tracks and those of the pale man and the cheetah, but there was nothing to show that Sunara had been there. What if she had gone farther along the cliff where it was steep, and had fallen? He heard, in his mind, the cracking of the deer's neck and shuddered at the thought of Sunara lying in a broken heap. He hurried on, his eyes searching a clue in the failing light, one arm hanging useless, but the pain forgotten or ignored.

He called, shouted, whistled, but his only answer was from the monkeys who scampered through the trees, pausing now and then to delouse each other and to hurl taunts and twigs at the youth.

It was one of the twigs that pointed to the small, almost indecipherable footprint. It was where the earth was damp and it clearly showed that Sunara was headed downstream and away from home. Natu felt great relief that at least she was on her feet, that no broken bones or snakebites had felled her. He called some more, straining his voice to such

a pitch that he could hear small, frightened animals scurrying away through the reeds.

When night came, he curled himself into an uncomfortable ball behind and partly inside a clump of prickly bushes, praying to Vishnu to protect him and Sunara through the dark. He longed for the protection of the thorn hedge at home, and for the company of his mother and for the comfort of Pung. His shoulder ached unbearably now that he was still, and the growling of his stomach made him remember that he hadn't eaten that day except for a leftover chapati in the early morning. He could almost taste the deer meat he had brought home and curled himself tighter to keep from feeling his emptiness. He reminded himself that this was the way he had felt most of the time in Pathan. He reminded himself that Sunara, wherever she was, must be suffering from hunger too. He reminded himself that his mother would be frantic with worry for both of them and not bother to cook the meat or eat. All his reminding didn't stop the howling of his stomach or keep the burning pain from his shoulder.

It was the longest night Natu had ever spent. Crawling things spent it with him, but fortunately no beast of prey came near. The roar of nocturnal animals seemed closer than ever before, and the terror of the forest kept him from even closing his eyes.

When a dim, milky light came to the east, Natu was on his feet again. He could move his hurt arm a little now and after he had bathed in the stream, his tiredness was forgotten. He munched on some bitter leaves and when the shadows of night had disappeared, he continued his tracking.

Many yards were carefully examined before Natu saw another footprint. It was still headed downstream. How could the silly girl keep going in the wrong direction? Was she really lost or had the spirit of adventure lured her on

and on? Natu remembered her boredom and restlessness. Surely she wasn't trying to get back to Pathan by herself?

He was wondering and questioning himself, trying to put himself into Sunara's mind when he saw a hoofprint of a baby pig. So that was what she was after! He could imagine her triumph when she had supplied their larder with the tenderest and most succulent of meats. He called and shouted, but only silence answered. On and on he searched. The stream forked into two small trickles. Which way to follow? He went several yards down the western spur with no success. The eastern course proved rewarding. Not only did he see the piglet's marks and Sunara's, but several horse prints too. That was alarming. What would a horse be doing in the Gir Forest? A few yards farther gave him a reasonable picture of what must have happened. Many horse prints, some shoe marks, and Sunara's toe tracks pointing north showed that she had started to run. The ground became scuffled.

Natu, with despair in his heart, went on a few yards. The piglet's tracks disappeared, heading away from the stream. Sunara's were no longer anywhere. The horse's prints were deeper and Natu knew it was now carrying two riders instead of one. He went farther to make sure, but all he saw were the horse tracks, which soon disappeared where the earth was hard and dry and were no longer visible.

He sat down to think. There were several possibilities of what had happened. Maybe the person on horseback had offered to take Sunara closer to Pathan. If that were so, and she had wanted to go, why did her toe prints show her to have tried to run away? Perhaps the rider had offered to help catch the pig. Impossible. She wouldn't have run away from such an offer. There was only one supposition that made any sense. She had been stolen, kidnapped, for what purpose Natu didn't want to imagine.

There was no use going farther. Heavyhearted, he started

home. His mother needed him. Maybe together they could devise a scheme to find Sunara. Perhaps Sunara would suddenly and blessedly reappear at their hut, unharmed and full of the excitement she had had on her adventure. He tried to think of happy endings, but it was no use. Slavery must be what the girl was in for. He blamed himself. He should never have let her come hunting with him, and when she had wanted to go home, he shouldn't have let her go alone. He cursed himself for a foolhardy, worthless, numskulled no-good. He, who had been so proud of making a new life and providing for his women, was nothing but a thoughtless, selfish, meat-eating Bhangi who had aspired through cleanliness to a higher station in the world. He deserved to be born a toad in the next incarnation. He deserved to be less than a toad. Siva, the destroyer, must be laughing at him.

It was some comfort, when he neared his home, to hear the soft crackle of fire and smell the aroma from the stew-pot. But when he appeared alone, Rani threw her sari over her face and rocked back and forth, her shoulders shaking in silent sobs.

No word was spoken while they ate without appetite, eating only to fill the void in their middles.

At last, hesitantly, Natu told his mother what must have happened to Sunara. To his surprise, Rani held him blameless. The burden rested with her, she explained, for the dreadful sins in a former life that had left her a widow, and for having run from her just reward, suttee, in Pathan.

"And now, Natu, you *must* see that I have to return!"

"Just whose funeral pyre do you propose to immolate yourself on, Mother?" Natu was harsh and impatient in his sorrow. "Just any old man's fire? What would that prove?"

Rani looked astonished. She hadn't thought that far. In her mind, which had been dazed with one resolve for so

long, her husband's pyre was still burning, waiting for her body to join his.

"I—I don't know! I thought—well—I could have my own pyre, couldn't I?"

"Nonsense!"

Rani at last knew it was nonsense. The knowledge didn't make her happy. Her thoughts, since they had left Pathan, had been absorbed by the one sacrifice she needed to make, and now the realization that it was too late left her limp and empty.

Natu regretted his harshness when, day after day, he watched his mother sag and grow old. Her spirit had gone. She was waiting for death with no prospect of a better life in the next incarnation. She was silent, moving from the hut to tend the fire and back again. Her lusterless hair, once so pretty with its streaks of gray, hung unattended. She bothered to bathe only when Natu insisted.

Their stewpot was seldom full now. The dry season had sent the deer to greener pastures. The nightly roars of the lions had a hungry, desperate sound to them. The few wild pigs were lean to the point of boniness. The stream was a mere trickle, barely moistening its bed as it lethargically meandered southward.

Natu sorely missed Pung's hunting ability but realized that even she couldn't hunt the unhuntable. She was far better off, he knew, under the protection of the Maharaja, who would house and feed her.

Sunara was always in his mind. He thought of her during the day and dreamed of her at night. It was fortunate, in a way, that now there were only two of them in the hut to feed. Their diet was skimpy and consisted mostly of boiled leaves, lizards, and grasshoppers. Rani did her best, in her apathetic way, to keep Natu fed. She had hoarded rice from their better days and made chapaties for him to take

with him when he went hunting. She seldom ate when he was not there to urge her, and her thinness became skeletal. Rani had removed her blue bangle when Sunara had disappeared. It hung on a peg inside the hut. Every day Natu saw her pause by the bangle to make a silent prayer, touching the blue stones, one by one.

The life they were leading was one of privation and despair, and many times it seemed to Natu hardly worth the effort he put into keeping them alive.

Then one morning, just before he started off on his daily hunt for food, he heard an unusual sound. A voice calling from downstream.

"Natu! Natu, it's Glen! I have something for you!"

12

NATU had no feeling of expectation or excitement as he went downstream in the direction of the calling voice, but when he saw the smiling, pallid face of his young rescuer, he felt a surge of something. Relief—happiness—worry? He couldn't tell. Whatever it was, a break in his dreary life was welcome.

"I've been thinking of you," Glen said when Natu came up to him. "As a matter of fact, I haven't been able to get you off my mind!"

"Why?" was Natu's simple question.

"You're something of a mystery, you know! But before we talk I have the Maharaja's reward here. He doesn't know about you," he said quickly, seeing Natu's look of alarm. "He thinks *I* found Puransing, which I did, in a way. Here!"

Glen held out a small bag that clinked as he handed it to Natu. Natu looked inside, smiled, and handed it back to Glen.

"I've never seen gold before," he said. "I suppose it is gold?"

Glen nodded and looked surprised.

"I have no use for it," Natu went on. "Food would be welcome, but gold! You can't eat gold!"

"You're hungry?" Glen asked.

"Always."

"I'm a fool!" Glen said as he tucked the bag into his pocket. "I should have known that the dry season would make game scarce! I'll make a bargain with you. If I bring you food now and then, will you tell me about yourself?"

"Tell me about Pung." Natu avoided the question. "Is she well? Is she happy? Do you think she misses me?"

"I think she does," Glen answered. "Kedah, one of my pupils, said she seems restless as if she wanted to be free again."

"Pupils? Are you a teacher?"

"I teach the Maharaja's two oldest sons when I can find them." Glen laughed. "When I first came to the palace the boys were made to stay with me, but now, Kedah is always with the animals in the stables and Ashraf—well, no one knows where he goes! I manage a lesson or two in the early morning before they vanish."

There was a feverish excitement in Natu's black eyes as he choked back soundless words.

"You seem interested," Glen said.

Natu took a trembling breath. "All my life I have—have wanted to learn," he stuttered. "I—I used to watch a letter writer in the baz—" He clapped a hand over his treacherous mouth.

"Don't be afraid to tell me." Glen's voice was kind.

"Your secrets are safe with me. Go on. You watched a letter writer in a bazaar?"

Natu nodded. He began to feel that the pale young man could be trusted.

"I always felt that if I could read and write, all our troubles would be over. Do—do you think that's true?"

"To a certain extent, yes. No doubt a new set of troubles would appear, but certainly the knowledge of reading and writing is most important."

"Instead of bringing food, would you teach me?"

"I don't see why not! But, Natu, you must trust me. Take me to your home so that I can understand you better."

Natu was reluctant. His home was the only thing he owned. To have an outsider violate its privacy, see its poverty, and perhaps laugh at its crudity, was something that would be hard to bear. But Glen's strangely pale eyes had a look of truth and sincerity, and the prospect of lessons was enticing.

So Natu led the way. As they entered through the thorn Glen saw the pathetic mud hut.

"What a marvelous place!" he said with heartwarming tact. "Did you build it yourself? I wouldn't have the faintest idea of how to go about making a home. How clever you must be!"

"My mother and sister helped." Natu's face had brightened to a smile at the unexpected praise.

"You have a mother and sister to provide for too?"

"Only a mother now."

A deep sadness took the place of Natu's bright smile. Glen heard a startled gasp and saw, in the doorway, an old woman looking at him as if he were a ghost. She gave a small shriek and disappeared into the dark interior.

"It's my color, I guess," he said. "I'm getting used to it. Nobody seems to know that where I come from everybody is white."

"You mean that there are others of your color? Excuse me, but I thought that you had a disease like—like leprosy maybe!" Natu's eyes were wide with wonder.

In a minute they were laughing comfortably together. When Natu went into the hut to reassure his mother, Glen looked into the pot that bubbled quietly on the fire. He almost threw up. The pot was full of snails, lizards, grasshoppers, and grub worms.

Quickly he left the fire. It would be a mistake to let Natu know he had discovered the extent of their poverty and hunger.

The lessons couldn't begin until Glen had brought paper, pencils, and books. It seemed obvious that to win Natu's confidence and to have him relate his history, Glen would have to do the talking first.

"Would you like to know something about the Maharaja's sons?" he asked.

"I would. Mostly about Kedah. I saw him once. But I would like to know about the Maharaja first. The holy man that we met a long time ago told us to stay away from him and his lands."

"The holy man was right! I believe that you live better here in the wilds than his subjects do in the villages! The villagers are always sick and often starving. They have to pay taxes or tribute for every bushel of rice raised, for every cow or goat sold. Whenever a baby is born, a gift must be made to the prince, and when that baby is named, has a birthday, gets married, or dies, gifts for each occasion must be credited to the stewards of the Maharaja. He accepts only gold or jewels. Star sapphires are his favorites. The deep-blue ones. You know, Natu, His Exalted Highness has more jewels, more pearls, more gold than can be counted. It's said that two great loads of bullion are buried in the courtyard because there's not room in his vaults inside!"

"And he has lots to eat! He must be a very happy man!" Natu said.

"I don't believe he's very happy," Glen mused. "He knows he won't live long because of his enormous fat. His heart is overloaded. Yet he keeps stuffing himself!"

"It must be fun to stuff, though!" Natu's hunger was apparent in everything he said.

"I must go now," Glen smiled. "But I'll be back. We'll start the lessons. About the bag of gold, are you sure?"

"It is yours," Natu said. "You *did* find Pung. I only kept her. And anyway what would I do with it? I will be more than repaid by learning to read and write."

Natu escorted his friend to the stream. Glen's horse was tethered on the cliff above and they waved to each other when Glen had scrambled up the steep incline. Natu went home with a far lighter heart than he had had for a long time.

Rani seemed brighter when Natu told her he was going to be educated. She looked at him with admiration as if he were already learned. Without Natu's urging, she bathed and dressed her hair and spent hours beating their clothes to a fresh whiteness that had been lacking since Sunara's disappearance.

Natu gratefully realized that the lessons were going to give Rani, as well as himself, something to live for, to plan around, and to work at. Their insect stew had a new flavor —success.

Glen came again two days later. With him were children's books in easy-to-read wording, three pencils, lined paper, and a pot of cold curry.

"All of it pilfered," Glen said happily.

The lesson began. Natu's enthusiasm overshadowed his ability, and he felt stupid. It was frustrating to hold the pencil and to try to copy words. The pencil wouldn't behave in his unskillful fingers.

Glen wrote numbers and letters for him to copy and left the simple picture books for him to study. He said he would be back in a few days.

Natu had a hard time tearing himself away from these books, the first he had ever seen, but he had to go hunting the small animals for the stewpot. His joy was boundless when he had controlled the pencil enough to make legible letters, although he didn't know what they were or meant.

When Glen next came, with more curry, he found that Natu had worked so hard and practiced so constantly that he was becoming an apt pupil. He could begin phonetics soon, tying the letters to the words.

Rani, out of sight inside the hut, listened intently as the lessons progressed. Often, without understanding, she could repeat, verbatim, some instruction of Glen's that Natu had forgotten, making his learning easier. It was a triumphant moment when he looked at a book and recognized one of the letters he had become familiar with, then another and another.

The day came, some time after the first lesson, when he could sound out all the words in all the books. It was a glorious feeling. Both he and Rani were fascinated with the tales of animals and birds in the book. Then Glen brought more difficult readers and started Natu on simple arithmetic. Natu had a natural bent for numbers now that he could form them with his pencil and read them from a book. Not only were the three R's taught, but Glen began to give Natu a condensed version of the history of India and an idea of its geography. Natu learned, with interest, of the vast deserts north of the Gir Forest where the only living things apparently were great herds of wild asses. He learned, with astonishment, that there were cities larger than Pathan. He learned, but could hardly believe, that there were pale people in his own country of India that ruled in certain places as the Maharaja ruled in his own

domain. He learned that they were Englishmen like his friend, Glen. And he learned that the year was eighteen hundred and three, but what that meant was a mystery.

"What are you going to do with all your knowledge?" Glen asked one day while they were eating the curry he always brought. "You can't just live here in the wilds without using it, you know!"

It was a question Natu couldn't answer. What good would an education do a Bhangi if he were to go back to civilization? What good would it do him here in the forest? Now that he knew a little, he thirsted for more. Without Glen he couldn't get more and he knew that eventually the lessons would end, and then what?

"What should I do?" he asked Glen. "I—er—there's a reason I shouldn't go away from here, or, at least, why I shouldn't go to a city or a town."

Glen looked at him. "That's because you're an untouchable, isn't it?"

13

THE MAHARAJA had been in a towering rage for weeks. His ministers, his servants, his wives, and his children avoided him as much as possible and cowered when, unavoidably, they were in his presence. The Prince's fierce black eyes darted venomously at every living thing. The palace dungeons were full of people unsure of what crime they had committed. Heads had been chopped off, servants had been hung by their thumbs, and taxation of the peasants had been doubled.

Many palace inhabitants knew the cause of the Maha-

raja's ire, but few outside understood the reasons for his reign of terror. The knowledge, or lack of it, didn't make it any easier.

Ashraf had been discovered visiting the pretty cousin in purdah, the cousin that was the Maharaja's youngest wife and belonged to him alone! The crime was punishable by torture and death, but the Prince had not yet decided which of his sons would succeed him and the killing of one of them was not a solution. Despite his frightful anger, he had a grudging admiration for Ashraf's daring. It was something he himself might have done in his youth.

However, Ashraf's punishment was severe enough. He was forbidden to go near the women's quarters ever again, even to visit his mother. His luxurious sleeping room was locked and sealed and he was made to bed down in an out-building. He was in solitary confinement except for two hours of lessons with Kedah and Glen. His humiliation was completed by having low-caste sweepers ordered to guard him.

Ashraf's dereliction was not the only reason for the Prince's wrath. His favorite cheetah, Puransing, although found and brought back to the stables, treated him, the Maharaja, with indifference and, almost, hostility. She no longer chirped at him, no longer closed her eyes in enjoyment of his caresses, no longer pushed her head against his body. It was an intolerable situation and one that kept his anger burning throughout his sleepless nights. He could have her beheaded, but he was reluctant to do away with the best hunter of his pack. Somehow she must be punished and brought to her senses. He devised, and discarded, scheme after scheme. Her orange eyes that used to look at him with affection now showed only a restless yearning to be away. Her former calm acceptance of life in the stables had changed to a constant, discontented pacing.

The stable attendants timidly tried to convince the Prince

that Puransing's behavior was only because she had tasted freedom and wanted it again. But they really knew there was something beside her desire for the wilds. Something or somebody had stolen her love and they knew that something or somebody must be made to pay for it. Something or somebody had stolen her collar too.

So the Prince's rage grew and grew. His personal servants—the ones that robed and disrobed his royal body, the ones that served his meals, and the ones that were always on call to bring him his snacks—wore bruises on their arms and legs from his vicious pinches, and blackened eyes and swollen noses from his heavy slaps. If his curry failed to burn his tongue sufficiently with highly seasoned condiments, its server was likely to find the whole dish thrown in his face. If a grain of rice had escaped adequate cooking and was hard to his teeth, or a sweetmeat was not sweet enough, anyone who was nearby suffered for the dereliction.

The whole palace lived in fear of his frightful irascibility, with one exception.

Glen went about his business calmly. When confronted by the evil-tempered prince, he looked him squarely in the eye, not blanching at the frenzied words nor cringing at the growls of frustrated rage. With the easy high-headed dignity of a tall man, he quietly went about his duties, teaching the madman's sons and mysteriously disappearing every so often on horseback.

The heat of the dry season did little to improve the tempers of anyone. The Maharaja wallowed in his enormous fat and suffered more from the heat than the others because of it. His rage at his son and his cheetah grew. Reason might have tempered his anger had a cool breeze or a refreshing rain soothed his fevered brain, but the stifling heat dispersed any sane thought he might have had during the monsoon. Counting his gold and fondling his sapphires

dispelled his ire for an hour or so. Dreaming up a punishment for a delinquent subject, deciding whether to behead him or maim him, occasionally satisfied his lust. Demanding more taxation from his peasants gave him momentary pleasure, but very shortly he was back in angry gloom again.

Ashraf and Kedah met only during lessons. Ashraf was glum and uncooperative and showed annoyance at Kedah's increasing interest in Glen's teaching. The animosity between the boys grew and spiraled quickly into hatred. Kedah didn't want to hate his brother, but it seemed that Ashraf discovered a perverse pleasure in a hatred he could express. The hatred foremost in his heart must have been for his father for imprisoning and humiliating him, but that couldn't be shown, of course. There was a definite pleasure in baiting his brother, saying as many hateful things as he could think of when Glen was otherwise occupied.

Kedah was uncertain how to react to Ashraf. He was sorry that his brother's punishment was so severe. Solitary confinement was most unpleasant, he was sure, and he knew that the outbuilding was not only dirty but steamingly hot. So he tried not to become resentful. He didn't like Ashraf, but he believed that the punishment was too severe for the crime of flirting with a little cousin. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in the classroom was tense and Glen was sensitive to it.

He was aware of a gathering cloud in the villages too. The Maharaja's hand had fallen heavily on the peasants. Hatred, hunger, and fear were the elements, the glue, that began to bind them together. Little crowds gathered and whispered, dispersing guiltily when a resident of the palace came in view.

The Prince had always squeezed his people dry, giving little or nothing in return. The peasants had known nothing of any other mode of living and had loved the brilliant

spectacles of royal birthdays, marriages, and religious fetes. But it had been a long time since they had enjoyed such a spectacle, taxes were beyond their means, punishment was at an all-time high, and resentment was burning at a slow but consuming rate.

Glen had been in the habit of going to the villages, after lessons and when he wasn't visiting Natu, to try to talk to the people, to try to teach them something about sanitation. He was talking to deaf ears. They always nodded politely and went right on poisoning themselves with contaminated water. It was a wonder that Glen kept on trying. Everyone knew that fifty percent of all babies born in India died before reaching two years of age, and if hygiene and medicine were available, they would grow up to *starve* at the ages of five or six! Which was better? It was a losing battle, but for a while Glen had persisted. However, after his last encounter with the villagers, it seemed better to concentrate on his untouchable friend, Natu, who responded so well. Perhaps Natu, being an Indian, could eventually help his people. The villagers certainly wouldn't listen to Glen, a white man living in the palace. He was definitely suspect. Resentful, ugly stares had been his reward the last time he had tried to talk to them.

One day, after English grammar, he planned to go to the Gir Forest to see Natu even though he had been there the day before and shocked the poor boy by recognizing that he was an untouchable. His plans, as so many do, went awry.

The tension in his classroom was beginning to tell on him. Ashraf and Kedah needed a jolt, a surprise or a happening that would bring them together again.

"How would you boys feel about sharing your lessons with an untouchable?" he asked.

Shocked disbelief appeared on both young faces, and Ashraf laughed.

"Kedah," he said in a friendly manner for the first time in weeks, "do you think the heat has finally got him? Has our tutor gone mad?"

Kedah was still staring at Glen with wide, shocked eyes.

Glen looked calmly from one boy to the other. "I haven't lost my mind. I am just asking a question and I'd like an answer after you have listened carefully. What if there was a boy, an untouchable, who was smart enough and knew how to read and write? What then?"

"That's a silly idea," Kedah said slowly. "There isn't an untouchable in the world who can read and write!"

"You're always trying things," Ashraf said. "You want the serfs to learn things above their station. Doesn't he, Kedah?"

"He just doesn't understand," Kedah said. "He doesn't know any untouchables or he wouldn't have such ideas!" He turned to Glen. "You see, they are filthy people. Stupid and filthy! Incapable of learning anything but sweeping. Should we show him the guards around your outbuilding, Ashraf?"

For a second, Ashraf's face looked glum, but then he smiled. "Yes, let's. He'll see!"

As they left the palace the boys walked together and chatted amiably. If Glen's idea had done nothing else, it had at least brought the brothers to a state of friendship again.

"There! Look!" Ashraf pointed to three dirty men asleep in the shade of the small building. The head of one rested on a broom, another's lolled on his chest, and the third's was openmouthed and tilted back against the wall. Their hair was long and matted and their dhotis were stained the color of the earth. Flies crawled over them without disturbing their rest. They weren't a pretty sight.

"If they were cleaned up, would you be able to tell them from anybody else?" Glen asked.

"Naturally! Certainly!" both boys exclaimed.

Glen shook his head and sighed. He and Kedah waited while Ashraf went into his prison with a wave. Kedah left for the stables and Glen turned again to look at Ashraf's building. The sweeper guards were still asleep.

In the darkness of the door Glen saw a flash of white. That was strange. Ashraf had not been wearing white today. Then a head peered out and quickly retreated when it saw Glen. It was the head of a very pretty girl.

Curiosity was a minor reason why Glen slowly advanced to the outbuilding. His major purpose was to protect his pupil from further punishment. If the Prince should find out that his son was not solitary in his confinement, there was no telling what he, in his irritated state, would do.

"Ashraf!" Glen called softly when he was within a few feet of the entrance. He saw the guards stir but not waken at his summons.

Ashraf poked his head out. "More lessons?" he asked.

"No, but I'd better speak to you a moment. May I come in?"

"No! No, I'll come out!"

There was complete silence inside the building. If Glen had not seen the girl, he couldn't have believed that Ashraf was not alone.

The two young men stood in the broiling sun looking at each other suspiciously.

"It's for your own good that I'm speaking," Glen began.

"Oh, oh! When it's for one's own good, nothing good comes of it!" Ashraf was unsmiling.

"I saw a girl—"

"I'm sure you've seen lots of girls! So what?" Ashraf tried to be offhand, but there was a tremor in his voice.

"I think you must tell me about her! It's better for me to know than your father, isn't it?"

The guards were beginning to stretch and yawn and soon would be on their feet. Ashraf looked at them with contempt and looked at Glen with nervousness.

"I—I—well, all right. Come in." Ashraf led the way.

It was dark and frightfully hot inside the outbuilding. At one time it had been used to cure deer hides and still stank of blood, chemicals, and corruption.

"A nice place my father has put me, don't you think?" Ashraf's bitterness was like acid.

When Glen's eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw the girl huddled in a corner, her large eyes shining with fright.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know!" Ashraf said. "She won't tell me! She won't talk or do anything I want her to! She eats only enough to keep alive, and I doubt if she ever sleeps. She's no good for anything! I made a terrible mistake when I—" he stopped short.

"When you what?"

"She fights silently, like a wildcat, in fact I think she *is* wild!" Ashraf avoided the question. "I'd turn her loose if I wasn't afraid she'd be caught and tell how—"

"You might as well tell me the whole story, Ashraf. I'm going to stay here until you do." Glen noticed that the girl had crept forward a few feet and her enormous eyes were fixed on him.

"She's a thief," Ashraf said. "Look at her arm! She's wearing a part of Puransing's collar! She won't tell me how she got it, though. She won't tell me anything! Maybe she can't speak. Maybe she's dumb. I hate her, but I don't know how to get rid of her!"

"If you'll tell me how you came by her, I'll do what I can to take her back to where she belongs." Glen was beginning to have an idea of who she was and where she came from.

Ashraf was reluctant to start his tale, but when he saw Glen settle down to wait, he shrugged his shoulders and began.

"It was my unlucky day! I was visiting my—my cousin and saw someone spying on me. It seemed a good idea to take a long ride, quickly, so that if my father was told, he would have time to cool off. I got my horse and rode for hours in a direction I had never taken before. I got to a stream and saw this girl chasing a pig. It seemed like a good idea then, fool that I was, to capture her and bring her home. She's pretty, you know, and I had no idea she was so full of fight! She struggled all the way and I was happy to push her into this building and lock the door. I had no idea that I'd be put in here, too, when I tried to sneak into my room in the palace. By all the gods, Glen, I'll be eternally grateful if you'll get her away. It's hard enough to keep her hidden, but even harder to be holed up with a she-devil!"

"Tonight," Glen said quietly. He looked at the girl. "Do you want to go home?" he asked her. Her eyes filled with tears as she nodded.

14

THE PALACE seemed deeply asleep when Glen crept out into the dark night. The heat, although it had given up some of its fierceness, still wrapped itself around a body like warm egg whites, and every movement made trickles of sweat run off the head and down the spine. There was no air stirring and even the insects' usual nocturnal roar was

quieted by the oppressive atmosphere. Slowly and cautiously he made his way to the building that imprisoned Ashraf and the girl. The guards were snoring, spread-eagled on the ground, and one was directly in front of the open doorway. Glen stepped over him and entered. The heat inside the building hit him with a fetid blast, making him gasp.

The girl was waiting for him, crouching near the door, and Ashraf was tossing on his pallet.

"Take my hand," Glen whispered to her, "and move quietly."

Ashraf sleepily nodded his thanks as the two crept through the doorway and over the supine guard. When they were out of earshot Glen whispered again. "I'll have to hide you till morning. I wouldn't be able to find my way in the dark. Is that all right? You won't be frightened?" The girl squeezed his hand in reassurance.

They were nearing the stables when a voice bellowed, "Halt! Who are you? What are you about?"

It was a member of the palace guard. Glen's heart sank, but he tried to lie their way out of trouble.

"It's only me, the tutor of the Maharaja's sons! And—and my girl! We're not harming anything!" He smiled a knowing smile at the guard. "You—you wouldn't stop us from a little frolic, would you?"

The guard took his work seriously. Furthermore he didn't believe that this sultry night was made for romance. He itched and sweated and welcomed a break in his monotonous duty.

"Come with me," he said.

With the litheness of a cat, the girl twisted her hand out of Glen's and ran. It was no use. She was stiff from inactivity and the guard caught her before she had run a hundred feet.

"Up to no harm, huh?" The guard's voice was unpleasant as he held onto the frightened girl and nodded to Glen to come along.

The palace was anything but asleep when they entered. One by one, the servants and ministers appeared, drenched in sweat and glad to leave their sleepless beds.

Even the Maharaja waddled his way into the great hall. His fat gleamed like melting grease.

"What's all this?" he thundered.

The guard explained and Glen, feeling embarrassed by the made-up story, choked and stuttered and repeated his tale.

The Maharaja laughed. "I didn't think a pale young man like you had it in him! I'm rather pleased. She's pretty! Where'd you find—" His eyes lighted on the girl's bracelet and the laugh turned into an angry howl.

"My sapphires!" he screamed. "Puransing's collar! What —where—how—" His congested face turned purple. He tottered as he stood and clutched at his heart. "I'm ill! Get me a chair! Give me wine!"

Three ministers supported him while the servants rushed to do his bidding. When he was seated at last and had emptied a flagon of wine, his hand gestured weakly at the girl and Glen.

"How did she get the collar?" His voice was a rasping croak. Nobody answered.

"Speak, girl! Come forward!" The croak was stronger and menace made it resound. "Speak!"

"My—my brother gave it to me."

"This is only half of it," the Prince said, glowering at her thin wrist. "Where's the rest?"

"My mother has it."

"Where did your brother get my cheetah's collar?"

"I—I don't know."

"Where is your brother?"
"I don't know."
"What do you know about Puransing?"
"I don't know any Puransing."
"Have you ever seen a cheetah?"
"I have seen a lion and a spotted animal with a funny face."
"Describe the funny animal."
"It had long legs and orange eyes and—and was very nice." Her eyes filled. "I loved Pung. We all did!"
"Who's Pung?"
"The funny spotted animal."
The Maharaja turned to his ministers. "It's clear," he said, "that this female was instrumental in stealing Puransing. And it's a fact that she's wearing my cheetah's collar. Throw her in prison!" He wouldn't admit, even to himself, that the reason, the foremost reason, for imprisoning the girl was jealousy. Either she or her mother or her brother had stolen Puransing's love. "I'll deal with her later. Help me to bed!"
Glen watched her slender, little figure droop as the guards led her away. He would have to bide his time before trying to help. Any attempt now, while the Maharaja was feeling ill and in a fury, would only result in worse treatment of the girl. He slowly went to his room.
Kedah was waiting for him.
"I don't know where you've been or what has gone on," Kedah said, "but my father's voice sounded worse than usual! Will you tell me what's happened?"
It occurred to Glen that Kedah might be of help.
"Kedah, I need your assistance," he said. "What I'm going to tell you must be secret. You agree?" Kedah looked interested and nodded at once.
"You and Ashraf are not my only pupils!" Glen said to

the astonished boy. "A young lad in the Gir Forest is studying with me too. You've met him!" Glen was careful not to reveal the low caste of Natu.

"I've met him?" Kedah's surprise grew. "But I don't know anybody—oh, wait! I do remember a boy and his mother and a very pretty sister! They were on my father's land and wanted to get to the forest as quickly as possible. I pointed the way! Is that the boy?"

"It is! His pretty sister was kidnapped by Ashraf and is now in one of the palace dungeons!"

"Why?"

"It's a complicated story. All you have to know right now is that the girl is without blame even though she's wearing half of Puransing's collar."

"The sapphire collar? How—"

"That's a part of the story and you'll know it all soon enough. What I want to find out is whether you are willing to meet Natu, my other pupil, and to help free the sister."

"I—I can try, I guess, to free the sister. I'll have to think for a while about how to go about it. And yes, I'd be glad to see the boy again. I liked his looks. Natu is his name, you said. I remember it now."

"Good!" Glen had been quite sure that Kedah would help, but it relieved him to find the boy so willing. "Do you wish to go back to bed now or do you want the whole story?"

"It's much too hot to sleep! Tell me the tale."

Glen started at the beginning from when he had found Natu hurt by the lioness and ended with Ashraf's kidnapping the girl and his problem with her.

Kedah was delighted. "It serves him right," he laughed. "I hope my silly brother has learned something! You know, it gives me an idea! Listen—"

Kedah and Glen whispered together for a while, then Kedah left for his own room.

The Maharaja slept late the next morning. Kedah had paced up and down the halls hoping to speak to his father before lessons began, but he had to go to the classroom without accomplishing his purpose. He arrived at the same moment as Ashraf.

Neither of the boys could concentrate and Glen was a little abstracted too.

"All right, boys, let's give up for now! Ashraf, I can see that you are dying to ask me questions about last night!"

Ashraf shot him a frantic glance.

"It's not a secret now," Glen continued. "Kedah knows about it."

"But—but how?"

"I told him because we need him! The girl is in a dungeon, Ashraf, because we were caught!"

"Almighty Siva!" Ashraf swore.

"Kedah has a plan that we hope will work."

"Anything to get rid of her!" Ashraf said. "Is there something I can do to help?"

"Just keep out of the way, know nothing, and say nothing!"

"What's the plan?"

Kedah explained it to his brother.

"But that's out of character!" Ashraf said. "Our father will never believe you!"

"I'm hoping he will."

"May Vishnu be with you!"

Glen took up a book. "We'll go on with lessons now, boys."

Some hours later Kedah heard roars from the Maharaja's chambers and knew his father was awake. The roars meant that the Prince's temper had not improved. Kedah waited. And Kedah waited some more. When he saw a servant bear a tray of sweetmeats and heard a contented murmur from the rooms, he entered.

"Well," the Prince greeted his son, "this is an unexpected visit! Why aren't you at the stables as usual?"

"I wanted to speak to you, my father. Alone!"

His Exalted Highness raised his heavy eyebrows, wiped his mouth with a hot, scented towel, and dismissed the ministers and servants.

"So?" he asked. "What is it?"

"My father"—Kedah put trembling emotion into his voice—"I am in love!"

The Maharaja choked. He spluttered. He burst into an uproarious guffaw. The servants and ministers poked their heads around the doors in surprise, only to be waved away by the laughing prince.

"Go on, tell me!" he managed to say between hiccuping giggles.

"I—I saw a girl last night when I couldn't sleep, my father, a very, very pretty girl."

"This does me good, Kedah! I haven't laughed for a long time."

"I didn't tell you this to make you laugh, my father. It doesn't make *me* laugh."

"To think that you, Kedah, have at last grown up! Have at last expressed an interest in girls! Ashraf now"—his smiles disappeared—"nothing would surprise me with that young whelp!"

Then the Maharaja frowned. "This 'very, very pretty girl' is not one of mine, is she?"

"No, my father, I don't think so. I saw the guards take her to the dungeons."

"Ah." The Prince looked relieved. "The little thief, eh? The pretty little purloiner of Puransing's collar! The stealer of my cheetah's heart!" His frown had grown darker with each description of the girl. "So? What do you want?"

"I want her."

"Absurd! There have been dozens of pretty girls offered

you, and you, you silly donkey, decide on a thief. No! Certainly not. I haven't made up my mind yet as to what punishment she'll get, but rest assured, my son, it won't be a nice one. She, if she lives through it, won't be 'very, very pretty' when it's over."

"I have seldom asked a favor, my father."

"You can be sure that no favor of that kind will ever be granted. Now get out of here! Go back to the stables and forget your nonsense, and I'll try to forget it too."

Kedah left as the ministers entered. He knew that they had been listening and felt their scorn as he dispiritedly slouched away.

His mien and pace changed when he got out of sight. He raced to Glen's room.

"It didn't work," he said to his tutor. "I think I convinced him that I had fallen in love, but he won't give her to me. Glen, he's going to do something awful to the poor girl! He hasn't decided what, yet, but—but—Glen, what'll we do? I don't know how much time we have. It depends on whether he makes up his mind as to which torture. In the past, I've known him to take six months to decide, or six minutes! What will we do?"

"Get your horse," Glen said. "We're going to take a ride."

15

GLEN's uneasy feelings about the villagers' unrest and resentment were not exaggerations. The people, used to staying segregated in their own compounds, were getting together with others and expressing their complaints. They

found, from village to village, that all their taxes had risen, hunger was rampant, many from each settlement were imprisoned, maimed, or dead. The hatred of the Maharaja and his stewards who collected for him was spiraling.

One small gathering in a nearby village expanded to several hundred angry men. The elders of the villages shook their heads and mumbled that no good would come of all this, but the young didn't listen. One after another rose to speak, each more impassioned than the last, egging each other on to greater hate. The contagion of violence soon had even the oldsters nodding in agreement.

"The gold," screamed one young man, "the gold that's buried in the palace courtyard! Why shouldn't it be ours? It *is* ours! We earned it with our blood and sweat and toil!"

"Together," someone bellowed, "we outnumber the palace guards! Why should we fear?"

"The Maharaja should fear us!" another voice cried. "He deserves every foul treatment he has given his villagers! Let us not hesitate to get our own back!"

"Down with the tyrant!"

"And all his family!"

"We'll release the prisoners and take him!"

"We'll divide his sapphires!"

"We'll take his women!"

"We'll live in the palace and let him live in the village!"

"We won't let him live at all!"

"Let him live long enough to know how it feels to be hung by the thumbs!"

"Slice off his ears!"

"Too easy on him! Let's strip him of his fat, layer by layer!"

On and on the threats thundered, exciting everyone to a hunger for revenge.

16

Natu couldn't concentrate on his lessons. His mind repeated over and over again the last words that Glen had uttered just before he had left. "You're an untouchable, aren't you?" Did he still look like a Bhangi despite his cleanliness? Had he given away his secret by some manner of speech? Did Glen now despise him?

Natu thought of the kind smile and the pat on the shoulder that Glen had given his shocked and speechless pupil as he departed. No, he surely didn't think it mattered too much to his tutor, and in a way it was a relief to have someone know. It is exhausting to try to be, even to oneself, something one is not.

Natu felt a great yearning for Sunara. His lessons would be more pleasurable if she were sharing them with him. He could talk things over with her, his problems, his struggle to learn, and his mixed feelings about being recognized for what he really was. Once again he cursed himself for his carelessness in letting her try to find her way home that terrible day. What had happened to her? Was she alive? Would she be better off dead? He tortured his mind with pictures of her suffering.

"My mother"—he turned to Rani, who was feeding the fire—"do you think of Sunara often?"

"All the time, my son. I see her pretty face in every

cloud and hear her happy laugh in every quiver of a leaf."

"Pretty?" Natu looked surprised. "Was she pretty? I guess she was. I never thought of it!"

"As lovely as the ripples in the stream, Natu. I thought you knew it. I am going to use the last of the rice today, my son. It is mostly dust now, but it will thicken the stew. I— oh, someone is coming!"

Natu stood up. How good of Glen to ignore his humble birth and continue the lessons! Natu had started down through the thorn when he saw that his tutor was not alone. He froze with apprehension.

"Natu," Glen called, "I have brought a friend. Don't be alarmed!"

Natu *was* alarmed. One person seeing his poverty and knowing his whereabouts was bad, but others knowing it too was unbearable. How could Glen have done such a thing? Then he saw that Glen's companion was the boy he had met before, the Maharaja's son. A Maharaja's son coming here? He would look at his hut, his stewpot, his ragged dhoti! He had an impulse to run, but steeled himself for the meeting.

They came through the thorn.

"Natu, Kedah, you've met before." Glen panted as he hurried. "We have no time to waste, boys."

Natu looked from one to the other in surprise.

"We've found your sister, Natu," Kedah said.

"Sunara! You've found her?" Natu's voice broke in excitement. "Where is—is she all right—how—?"

"We must rescue her, Natu." Glen was sober. "So far she's all right. She's in a dungeon in the palace waiting for her punishment for stealing Puransing's collar."

"Oh, no! My fault again! What can we do?"

"Kedah has a plan, Natu. I've told him of your love for Puransing, Pung, I mean, and hers for you. If she'll obey your orders, we have a chance to get past the guards. You

see, all but the stable attendants are frightened of the cheetahs. Do you begin to get the picture?"

"Sort of! Anyway I'll do everything I can. Do we go now? Wait! I must tell my mother and get the other half of the collar."

Rani looked twenty years younger when Natu told her that Sunara was alive. She made no protest when he took her bracelet off the wall, and she told him not to worry about her. She would be all right and there was enough stew to last her for days. Natu doubted that, but he had no choice. He bade a hurried farewell and ran to catch up with the others.

After the breathless scramble up the cliff, Natu had his first ride on a horse. He was terrified, even though he rode in back of Glen and held onto Glen's waist with a grip of iron. Over the plain, through a forest and jungle they galloped. Natu bounced uncomfortably on the hard rump of the running horse. Then the palace came in view. It was awe-inspiring to the Bhangi boy and frightened him considerably. The red sandstone edifice grew larger and more impressive with every gallop of the horse. The late afternoon glow of setting sun made the palace burn with a fiery light.

There was a thick clump of trees not far from the stables. The horses came to rest behind it.

"You wait here," Kedah said to the others. "I'll go to see how many are in attendance in the cheetah section. We have to hide you, Natu, until it's dark."

When Kedah cantered away, Natu slipped off the rump of Glen's horse. He wondered if he could ever walk again. His legs were splayed outward, his seat was hot and painful, and his insides were still joggling. He stretched the muscles in his wiry body and felt life surging back to his bruised and abused bones. Horses were pretty to look at, he

thought, but what a way to travel! He paced up and down, wondering, hoping, confident and frightened in turns about the task ahead of him.

In a surprisingly short time Kedah was back.

"It's very strange," he said, "but there's not a soul in the cheetah stables. Not anybody around the horses either, and I went to the elephant compound and not one mahout was there. I don't understand it at all. But anyway, it makes it easier for us. Come along. I'll take you directly to Puransing, Natu, then Glen and I will hurry to the palace to see what's going on."

Pung must have felt Natu's approach. She burst into a crescendo of chirps even before the boys entered the stable. She strained at her leash as Natu ran to her. It was a love feast as he wrapped his arms about her and she bumped and pushed against him.

"May I stay with her?"

"Yes. If the attendants return, tell them I told you to stay here and that I'll be back soon."

Kedah and Glen walked rapidly away.

The guards that usually were stationed around the palace were missing. When the youths entered the great doors, they noticed that there were only a few ministers who scurried from place to place, and there was no sign of the numerous servants that heretofore had salaamed a greeting or offered refreshments.

They were astounded when Ashraf ran up to them. He was supposed to be imprisoned in the outbuilding, guarded and certainly not free to have the run of the palace!

"What's going on?" Kedah asked.

"There's going to be an uprising of the villagers! We got word a little while ago. Our father is furious. All the servants, stable attendants, and mahouts have joined the peasants."

"When is it going to be?"

"We don't know! We don't know what they're going to do, either. The prison guards are the only ones left. And the ministers, of course. Our father has locked himself in his rooms, absolutely scared to death and furious too. There's nobody to cook his curry or make his sweets. It's rather funny in a way."

"Has he made a decision about the girl?"

"What girl?"

"The girl you kidnapped, you idiot!"

"Oh! Oh, no, I don't think so. I doubt if he's given any thought at all to his prisoners."

"Are there still guards on duty around the dungeons?"

"I suppose so, I don't really know. Why?"

Kedah looked at his brother thoughtfully, then shook his head. "I just wanted to know," he said.

They heard the Maharaja bellowing. "Where are my sons?" he screamed. "I want my sons! I want Ashraf and Kedah! I want them this minute! I want their lily-skinned tutor too! I want them all now! Now! *Now!*" His voice shrilled with hysteria.

The three youths went quickly to the locked doors.

"We're here, my father!" Kedah called.

There was a fumbling on the other side and the door opened an inch. One bloodshot eye looked them over, then the door was opened just enough for them to squeeze through, one at a time, and was relocked.

The Maharaja's face was crumpled and green-tinged with fright and worry, and he seemed to have shrunk in height. But with his sons beside him, he made an effort to become the fierce, bold, brave tyrant they had always known. He sat very erect in his tall chair and beckoned the young men close to him.

"This is a ridiculous situation we have, my sons. A nuisance, an insult to us all. Nothing to be alarmed about, of course. A nuisance, that's all." His quavering voice be-

lied his easy words. "I have decided to let you, whichever one has the best idea, put it into effect. One of you will be ruler after me, you know. Now let's see which one it'll be!"

"Have the ministers kill all the peasants?" Ashraf suggested in a weak, questioning manner.

"Let the prisoners go and declare a tax-free month?" Kedah sounded almost as unsure as his brother.

"Idiots!" The Maharaja was more his old self as he listened impatiently to his sons. "You, Ashraf, you fool boy! The peasants outnumber the ministers three to one, even if the weak-kneed ministers could fight! The guards have disappeared, so we can't count on them. And you, Kedah, you stupid dreamer—the prisoners would join the uprising and make them that much stronger. Let them go for a month without taxation? Rats! Now you, Mister Glen Harris-Towne, have you a sensible thought in that pale head?"

"Er, sir, the peasants are simple folk, I believe. A distraction, maybe a religious fete or a marriage?"

"My idiot minister hasn't come back from arranging my children's weddings." The Prince's eyebrows looked thunderous. "And this is not the season for religious fetes. Think again!"

Kedah broke in. "Turn the elephants and the cheetahs loose. The peasants would be terrified."

"Stupid! The mahouts and cheetah attendants are with the villagers and need say but a few words to have the animals obey them. They could turn the beasts on us."

Ashraf hesitated before saying, "You might offer every man in every village a sapphire." He cringed at his father's look of horror and indignation.

"Would you consider a prize of some kind, a cow or goat or free grain for the man who puts down the rebellion?" Glen suggested.

The Maharaja looked thoughtful. "It might work. It

wouldn't have to be a good cow or goat and the grain could be ungerminated. It's possible."

"No, my father!" Kedah was bold. "Any prize you offer must be first-class."

The Prince sulked.

"I agree with Kedah," Glen said. "You must make it worthwhile for someone to risk his life in taming the wrought-up peasants!"

"You may be right," the Maharaja sighed. "But who can get word to the peasants that there's to be a prize?"

While they were all considering this question, there was a frightful crash somewhere in the palace. Shouts, cheers, then a few triumphant laughs froze the occupants of the Maharaja's quarters.

17

THE HEAT had not diminished with the sinking of the sun.

It seemed to Natu only a short time that he had been with Pung, fondling and talking softly to her. Breaking the hush of twilight, a great commotion started up around the palace. He peered out of the stable door and saw the grounds come alive, as though black vipers' teeth had sprouted ragged men carrying the iron-tipped sticks that they used as plows. The men shouted fiercely to urge each other on and to bolster each other's courage.

"To the gold in the courtyard!"

"Get the Maharaja first!"

"Scare off the guards!"

"Hurry! Hurry! Run!"

"Knock down the doors! Get the sapphires!"

"Put the tyrant in one of his own cells!"

"To the dungeon with him!"

Natu looked and listened to the noisy peasants with uneasy fascination as they converged on the palace. He had little interest in the fate of the Maharaja, but his sister, Sunara, was somewhere in there and he had to do something! Also, his friend, Glen, and the boy, Kedah, were worth saving. Should he wait in the stables as he had been told or should he take matters into his own hands? A chirping from Pung decided him.

He unleashed the cheetah and told her to follow him. Darkness was falling fast. Natu could see the black forms of running peasants silhouetted against the glow of the palace.

Pung, with her long-legged pace, stalked at Natu's heels. They went slowly and carefully, staying out of the way of the noisy villagers and skirting the opposite side of the palace where only a small amount of light could fall on them. As they turned the second corner, the entrance came in view and with it a curious quiet that made Natu more uneasy than had the former shouts.

Soon he saw why there was relative silence. The battle, or skirmish, seemed to be over. The inhabitants of the palace—ministers, guards, servants, and hangers-on—had disappeared like scurrying beetles into the night. The revolutionists had won the palace, except for one locked chamber, and were busily and happily looting. Objects that they had no possible use for, statues of gods, wall sconces, precious rugs, and carved benches were dragged out of the big doors and piled carelessly in a heap with dented silver and cracked crystal. The peasants were too occupied to notice the slender boy and the lithe form of the silent cheetah as they eased their way into the palace.

Suddenly a shout rang out. "A cheetah!"

The looting stopped abruptly.

"Who's the boy?" one voice cried.

"He must be one of us!" another answered. "He certainly is not of the palace! Look at his clothes!"

"Onward!" one of them yelled. "We're wasting time! Find the Maharaja!"

Before they started dismantling the great hall again, Natu asked where the dungeons were.

"That way, probably. But stay and help us move these things!"

Natu shook his head and ran down a corridor to the right, Pung loping easily beside him.

It was quiet in the long hall. The shouts and laughs of greed seemed far away as the boy and the cheetah followed the winding passage. The torches were widely spaced and the light was dim. There were no windows to the outside and the air became stale and damp and fetid. A coolness wafted from ahead and there Natu found a narrow doorway with stone steps leading deep into the earth below the palace.

He felt his way down. The steps were unlighted, but a murky glow could be seen far below. Pung, like all cats, was able to see in the dark and she loped ahead.

There was a scream, then another. "Go way! Help! A lion! Oh!"

When Natu reached the bottom he saw two guards cowering against the cellblocks. Pung was calmly looking at them. Torches lighted a long, slimy corridor with doors on both sides. Natu knew that he had arrived at the dungeons and with Pung at his side he would have no trouble freeing Sunara.

But there was a sudden scurry and a large rat raced past. Pung was after it. The rat flew up the steps, the cheetah in excited pursuit, and the guards found their courage again as the sound of the chase faded into the distance.

"Ha! A volunteer prisoner!" exclaimed one.

"Lucky the old peasant died this morning. We have only his cell vacant!"

The guards converged on Natu.

He fought. He kicked and bit and yelled for Pung, but it was no use. Roughly he was thrown into a narrow cubicle and the door clanged behind him.

Natu looked around his prison. A little light found its way through the small grille that gave onto the hall. The prison was dank and decaying. Glossy beetles and roaches that had spawned in the damp corners lived at ease on the stained and sweating walls. Draperies of dust-laden cobwebs hung from the ceiling, and the floor glistened with a greasy patina.

There was nothing to sit on or lie on but the cold stone. The discomfort of the place meant nothing to Natu, but his heart was heavy with failure. It seemed that nothing he ever tried turned out well. If he had stayed in the stables as Kedah had told him, he would be free to—No, the dungeons had been his goal and he was in the dungeons. He put his head to the small grille.

"Sunara!" he bellowed. The word echoed and reechoed through the long corridor.

"I'm here, Natu!" Sunara's voice sounded far away.

The guards came running to Natu's cell. "One more sound out of you and your tongue will be cut out!"

It was all right. He had let Sunara know that she was not alone and Sunara's answer had assured him that she was still alive.

He settled down to wait for Pung. When she came back, and she was sure to, he could threaten the guards with her. He would tell them that unless they released him he would order the cheetah to attack. He smiled when he thought of their impending terror.

Minutes and hours passed and Pung had not returned. Surely she had dispatched the rat long ago. Where could

she be? What had happened that could keep his affectionate pet from his side? Worry began to drag at him.

No noise of the looting penetrated into the depths of the dungeons. There was a constant murmur of sighs, groans, snores, coughs, rustling of insects, and pattering of rodent feet, but hush seemed to be the permanent atmosphere of the underground chambers. Hush and chill. It was hard to remember the heat on the surface of the earth. Natu felt the cold creep from his horny, bare feet up through his legs and into his body.

While Natu waited and worried, convulsed by occasional shivers and wondering how long he would be locked up, Pung was having a lovely time.

Cat-like, she caught the rat and let it go, pouncing again on this delightful plaything, tossing it in the air, pretending indifference, looking away, then capturing it again. Up the narrow steps and along the dim corridor they enacted this sport, and Pung didn't hear, or didn't care, that the noise was increasing. Most of the torches were extinguished in smoking embers on the floor of the big hall when the rat made a rush into the disorder of trampling feet.

Pung was confused. There were too many humans, laughing and shouting, and the interest she had had in the game suddenly evaporated. She slunk along the wall, a shadow in the dim light, attracting no attention from the milling peasants. She paused to watch a dozen men battering down a heavy door, pricking her ears at the shrill cries from within, and she was about to turn back when the door gave and she saw familiar people inside.

In the murky recesses of her animal mind she knew that she had been with a friend, but no picture of Natu in the dungeon came to clarify her confusion. Inside the room were familiars and she bounded in just as all the lights were extinguished. She ran into a soft body and heard a frightened gasp, then hands passed over and examined all her

body. A sigh of relief gently wafted over Pung's head. Fingers clasped her collar and, together, the soft body and the cheetah moved around the edge of the room.

Shouts of "We've got them!" bounced off the sandstone walls. In the dark only Pung could see. She saw the peasants tumbling over each other as they escorted their prisoners through the door. She paused, with the hand clutching her collar, until the room was cleared, then slowly she led the way into the gloomy hall and out of the palace. Pung and the body attached to her were just other black figures in the excited black throngs.

"Have you dug up the gold?"

"Have you got the women?"

"Where are the jewels?"

"Are you sure you have the Maharaja and his family? Where are they?"

"We have them!"

"Have we left any valuables inside?"

These and other yells from the rioters made the hand on Pung's collar tremble. They meant nothing to the cheetah. Her desire was to get out of the way of the noisy humans and to go to the one place where she had known complete happiness and freedom. She guided her charge past the stables and into deep forest. Her pace was slow, but her hanger-on panted and gasped and groaned and pulled back on her collar and wheezed and stumbled. She slowed her easy lope to an amble, not out of sympathy, but because the hot night was making her sleepy. She knew who was holding so tightly to her. It was not her favorite human and she had a faint remembrance that her favorite was somewhere, not too far away, where she should be right now. However, this human was one who had always been kind to her. And she didn't care as long as she was headed home. Her real favorite would be there as usual. Hadn't he always been?

They moved in an erratic path. The cheetah could pick her way easily, but the heavy body that clung so close kept bumping into branches and bushes. At last it sank to the ground in total fatigue, but the strong fingers never lost their grip on Pung's collar.

A sliver of moonlight cut through the overhanging trees for a moment and lighted the tawny body of the cheetah and glinted off the gorgeous robes of the exhausted Maharaja.

18

NATU, cold and uncomfortable, worried about Sunara and unhappy about the cheetah's disappearance, finally remembered Pung's half collar wrapped in a fold of his dhoti. This sapphire bracelet might be an appropriate bribe to the jailers for his and Sunara's release. He could show it to them but craftily not give it up until Sunara was brought to his cell and his cell door opened. The more he thought about it the better the plan seemed.

But he was not to get a chance to use it.

The guards were grumbling, at first with impatience, then with anger. "Where is our dinner? What's holding them up? Where is the swill for the prisoners? We've never had to wait so long!"

They paced restlessly up and down, cursing and muttering, scowls on their faces and a note of worry in their voices. On their third or fourth lap along the corridor one of them said, "I'll go up and see why we have been forgotten."

"No!" the other said, "I'll go. You stay here."

"Oh, no! I know the palace very well, better than you do, and anyway I came on duty earlier!"

"About a minute earlier is all! I'll go!"

Natu wondered if they would come to blows. Their voices were shrill with irritation. They passed out of his range of vision and he didn't know which one had gone. He knew that one of them had won because there was only a single guard when next he paced by Natu's window.

"Ssst." Natu tried to attract the guard's attention. The guard's scowl deepened, but he walked by without pausing.

Fifteen minutes, a half hour, then an hour passed and the other guard hadn't returned. The remaining man changed his walk to a stamping, angry trot, his mutters became shouts, and finally he yelled at the prisoners, "That progeny of a pig has deserted! I'm going up to find him! I don't have to tell you that any attempt at escape will be punished by a very uncomfortable death! I'll be back, so no noise or talking!"

The prisoners were as still as vegetables as they listened to the guard's footsteps grow distant up the narrow staircase. Then cries came from every throat.

"Thapa, are you alive?"

"Can't we get out of here?"

"Where are you, Nail?"

"Can we dig our way out?"

"Sunara!"

"Why don't we—"

"Natu!"

It was difficult to distinguish one voice in the cacophony of all the others, but Sunara's came clear as a bell to Natu's anxious ears. They were in a hopeless situation unless some discipline was exerted. If they worked together, it might be possible to get free during this period of inattention.

"Quiet, everyone!" Natu yelled. "I have an idea!"

Only the adjacent cells hushed, the rest kept crying out their messages.

"Pass the word along for quiet!" Natu roared. "Each person can have his say, but first we must have quiet!"

Cell by cell the word was passed until not even a whisper could be heard.

"Now," Natu cried, "is there anyone whose door is rotting enough to be loosened?"

"Mine is pretty weak," came a voice from far down the corridor.

"Work on it then! Has anyone got bars that are loose? Drains big enough to get through? Anything at all that can be used for escape? Is anyone's arm thin enough to reach through the bars to unlock his door?"

He was answered by scratches, grunts of effort, bangs, curses, and finally one triumphant yell.

A prisoner was free!

"Now start freeing the rest of us!" Natu cried, and he watched with open disbelief as the prisoner, intoxicated with his own escape, rushed past the cells and up the stairs with no thought for the others.

Fights, jealousy, accusations, belligerency, rivalry, and bellicose words had taken the place of the villagers' first intoxication of victory. The gold they had dug up had not appeased their hunger, and how was it to be divided anyway? The peasants who had done the digging claimed the major share, but the ones who had frightened the retainers of the palace and scared off the guards considered that they had more right to it than the diggers. There was no one to decide.

Pearls and sapphires lay in small heaps, with villagers squabbling over who owned what and accusing each other of sorting for their own benefit.

Nobody had thought to raid the kitchens or storehouses, and all of them were reluctant to go back, to leave all the wealth to their mistrusted neighbors, to forage for food when treasure was at their fingertips.

The Maharaja's wives and offspring were huddled, miserable and terrified, close to the arguing villagers. Off to one side Glen, Kedah, and Ashraf were tied together in chain-like loops of leather. As the peasants roughly handled the women, crudely deciding which they would select, a discovery was made.

"Where is the Maharaja?" screamed one.

"What do you mean, where is he? He's with his sons, of course, over there!"

"He isn't!"

"He must be!"

"But he isn't!"

There was a great rush of ragged men to the group of prisoners. Children were knocked down and trampled, women screamed in new terror, and a roar of anger burst for the peasants when they found they had failed to capture the Maharaja.

Accusations flew like arrows.

"You! You meat-eating son of a goat! You accepted a bribe to let him go, didn't you?"

"No! No, I swear!" but the protesting voice was drowned in screams of wrath.

"And you! Why did you let him go?"

"I didn't!"

"What did he pay you? Why isn't he here, then?"

"Hang them by their ears!" Nobody knew whether the prisoners or the ones responsible for the failure were to be hung by their ears, but nobody cared. Each man was pitted against his neighbor. Every individual was convinced that the other had cheated and was getting more than his share. Everybody put the blame on everybody else.

"Did anyone free our families from the dungeons?"

The question put a sudden hush on the rioters. Nobody answered, and it was realized that their imprisoned friends had been forgotten. But not a soul volunteered to go to the palace to free them. The gold and the jewels might disappear while the self-appointed messenger went on his compassionate errand.

The hush lasted only a minute.

"Divide the women first, then take the prisoners to the place we decided on!" One man was heard before the uproar of angry voices rose again.

"Divide the gold first! We'll find the Maharaja later!"

"Kill the prisoners! Why make that long trip?"

"I was the one who found the sapphires! I demand my rights! I'll make the shares!"

"You all know me for an honest man! Let me keep the treasures until everything's decided!"

"Honest? Honest as a cobra! Divide now!"

"We need a leader! Now I—"

"Look who wants to be a leader!"

"I'm the oldest! Listen to me!"

But nobody listened. Rage and empty stomachs, weariness and frustration, addled their already bemused and unthinking minds. They fell upon each other, battling with their fists and any instrument that came to hand. The pearls and sapphires were scattered and the gold was kicked into the dust. Women were crushed against each other and cries of terrified children rose above the sounds of fury.

A pale lightening of the sky brought some sanity to the fighting peasants. Either the dawn or exhaustion made the individual battles become weak, ineffectual swats. Rivals who had been in a death grip loosed their holds and collapsed to the ground. Old men and young men and the ones in between looked at each other with hate in their faces still, but tired arms hung limply at their sides and trembling

legs gave way. Soon most of them were sitting breathless, or lying weakly, on the churned-up earth.

"Now what?" A reedy voice was heard.

There was no answer.

19

THE CAPTIVES in the dungeons were shocked to a stunned silence when the free prisoner dashed past them. It was unthinkable that one of them had achieved liberty and left the others to rot or starve in their moldy cells. Shock was displaced by anger, and cries of outrage echoed through the dim corridor. Cries and groans and curses.

Natu made his voice heard over the hubbub. "If he could do it, so can we! Start to work!"

It was strange that a mere boy should take the leadership among dozens of adults. But it was obvious that leadership was needed. At once the yells ceased and the scrabbling, scratching, and knocking began again.

Natu thought of Pung's half collar. Perhaps if it were held in a loop it could reach through the bars to unlock the bolt that held the heavy door. He tried it. His arm squeezed through the bars only halfway to the elbow. No matter how he strained, the looped collar wouldn't reach the bolt.

"Sunara!" he called. "Have you still got your bracelet?"

From far down the corridor her answer came faintly. "I have, Natu!"

"Make it into a loop, Sunara. Try to get your arm through the bars and see if you can catch the bolt. Then pull up slowly."

All scratching and knocking ceased as the captives

seemed to hold their breaths waiting to hear whether the unknown Sunara was successful.

"It hurts my arm, Natu!" came the far-off cry.

"Our mother will fix your hurts, Sunara! You want to see her again, don't you? Keep on trying!"

"Natu!" Sunara's voice was despairing. "I've unlatched the bolt and the door is open, but my arm is stuck in the grating. Oh, it hurts! It's bleeding! Natu, what shall I do? I can't get my arm free!"

"Be brave, Sunara! Work it loose slowly. Spit on it to make it slippery. Twist it gently. I know it hurts, my sister, but be brave!"

Natu felt cold sweat running off his forehead. The dungeon was hushed in expectant silence. Some hard breathing and a few muttered prayers to Vishnu could be heard, but all effort at escape was suspended.

"It's coming, Natu! My skin is being torn to ribbons, but it's coming! Oh! Ow!— Ah, I'm free!"

Natu heard the hurrying patter of her bare feet coming toward him as other prisoners cried, "Me first!" "Let me out!" "Cursed girl, she passed my cell!" "Please, in the name of Brahma, free me!" "Help!" "Please!"

Sunara didn't pause until Natu's voice stopped her. She fumbled with the bolt on his door and in a minute it swung wide. They threw their arms around each other. Sunara's face was streaked with tears and Natu's already dirty dhoti was further soiled by her torn and bloody arm. But their hearts rejoiced in their reunion.

The other prisoners were yelling and screaming for freedom. Some begged, some cursed, all made an unbearable uproar.

Natu roared back, "Quiet! Do you want the guards to come back? I'll let you loose in a minute."

He bound Sunara's arm in a loose part of her sari and told her to stay in his cell while he unlatched the others.

One by one, down the long corridor, he unbolted the heavy doors, and the prisoners rushed out without a word of thanks. They mobbed and trampled each other on the narrow stairs and there were cries of pain as the weaker ones were crushed to the stone steps.

In disgust Natu turned back to get Sunara and had almost reached his cell when a movement through a door he had opened caught his eye. He paused.

An old and feeble man was crouched in a corner. Only his eyes seemed alive in his withered body.

"Aren't you going with the rest?" Natu asked.

The old man shook his head. "I can't walk," he said.

"Had you no friends in here to help you?" Natu already knew the answer. It had been every man for himself with no thought for friends or family in their escape.

"I'll be back," he said and felt a surge of sorrow when the eyes of the old man showed resigned disbelief.

But the old eyes lighted up with surprise and joy when shortly Natu and Sunara came into his cell. Together they raised the wasted body. With Sunara's good arm and both of Natu's they could support the old man. He was able to shuffle his bony feet along the stone floor and slowly they got to the steps. The stairway was empty by this time. Even the wounded, crushed, weak ones had managed to scramble up and disappear into the night.

It was difficult to get the old man from step to step. Natu had to almost carry him while Sunara helped by pulling. Their progress was painfully slow, and Natu's feeling of urgency made his impatience hard to conceal. He wanted to be well on the way home with Sunara before dawn. But he couldn't leave this helpless old one.

At last they arrived in the long, winding corridor and moved as fast as they could propel their burden. The shambles of battle were becoming apparent with broken statu-

ary, burned-out torches, and abandoned weapons. But the quiet proved that the palace was deserted, and Natu breathed a sigh of relief. Once outside they could leave the old man and hurry toward their home in the Gir Forest.

That is what he had hoped, but when they made their way out of the palace doors and into the black night, Natu found that he couldn't possibly desert the feeble old man. Without him and Sunara to half carry, half propel, the ancient would collapse to the ground and be left to whatever fate the gods allowed. It was unthinkable to be so cruel.

"Where do you live, old one?" he asked.

"Not far." The whispered answer was barely audible.

"Is it this way?"

The old man nodded. What little strength he had had was rapidly fading. His feet seemed not to be able to shuffle one ahead of the other now.

"Sunara," Natu said, "I'm going to try to carry him. We'll never get home at this pace. Do you want to hide in the stables till I get back or do you want to come with me?"

"I don't ever want to be away from you again, Natu. Never! I'll come with you."

For all his skeletal thinness, the old man's wasted body was a heavy load for Natu. He staggered wildly when he first hoisted him onto his back, but steadied himself and managed to attain a fairly rapid walk. It was fast enough to make Sunara pant as she trotted alongside.

Natu wondered if bones broke when they were overburdened. His back and arms felt on the verge of cracking when they arrived at the outskirts of a village.

"Is this it?" he asked the old man.

There was no answer. The ancient had either gone to sleep or was unconscious. Well, he would carry him to the heart of the village and leave him for others to care for.

As Natu threaded his way through narrow, stinking alleys strewn with rotting refuse and animal droppings, Sunara said, "It smells like Pathan, doesn't it?"

When they got near the tiny plaza, they became aware of many humans. They were lying on the ground or sitting in exhausted positions, leaning against the dusty walls. At one side of the square a small bunch of people stood together and Natu saw, in the dim light of torches, that they were shackled.

As he and Sunara became visible to the villagers they rose from the ground and started threateningly toward them. This was no time for timidity, Natu thought.

"I have released the prisoners!" he called. "And carried this last one! I hope he belongs here!"

He lowered the old man to the ground and flexed his cramped muscles.

"It's not an enemy!" one voice yelled.

"He's freed our people! He's one of us!" cried another. They began to cluster around him when a familiar voice was heard above the others.

"Natu!"

The villagers fell back. The voice came from the group that stood in their bonds on one side of the square. Confusion was in the peasants' uncertain minds. This newcomer had rescued the prisoners from the palace but was hailed by one of *their* prisoners! What did that make him? One of them or one of their enemies?

"Who are you?" "Which village do you live in?" "Why does a member of the palace call you by name?" The questions blended together in wary suspicion. One harsh voice rose above the rest. "Don't take chances! Put him with our prisoners and take the girl. Better to be sure!"

"Run, Sunara!" Natu's voice was desperate. "Avoid everybody and hide during the day! I pray to Vishnu that

you get home. Even if you're lost, it'll be better than to be a captive of these savages!"

Sunara disappeared into the shadows like a wisp of smoke as a dozen men laid rough hands on Natu. They swore horribly when they saw that the girl had vanished, but, having the palace women at their mercy, they didn't bother to pursue.

Natu was pushed and pulled over to the men who stood tied to each other.

"I'm so sorry, so terribly sorry, Natu." It had been Glen who had called to him. "I could have cut my tongue out when I realized my recognition was to be your undoing! I'm a fool and I'm bitterly ashamed!"

Natu forced a smile to his tired face. He watched as a thong was tied to one of his wrists, looped through Glen's thong and then tied to the other wrist. "It was a natural thing to call out," he said. "Don't be ashamed! At least I'm with a friend!"

"Natu!" Kedah whispered. "I'm glad to see you even in these circumstances! I've been thinking. The women and children aren't tied. Do you think we can somehow save them?"

"Who is this person?" Ashraf, who was tied to Kedah, moved close.

"A friend, my brother, and a pupil of Glen's," Kedah replied.

"A pupil!" There was disbelief in Ashraf's tone.

"My best pupil, I'd say," Glen chimed in.

"We can talk of this later," Kedah said. "Right now I'm asking Natu about the women. What do you think, Natu?"

Natu was pleased to be consulted and a frown of concentration clouded his face.

"We could make a noise, try to escape, and attract the villagers' attention. But how can we tell the women to run while we're doing it? They're way over there!"

"Let's ease our way toward them while the peasants argue," Glen suggested. "They're so busy defending the jewels and gold from one another they may not notice."

Inch by inch they shifted their position until a whisper could get the women's attention.

It was the pretty little cousin who saw them first. Hers was the only face not convulsed with fear. Her bright eyes showed excitement instead of terror, and when they lighted on Ashraf, an open smile showed her pretty teeth.

"You tell her, Ashraf," Kedah said. "Tell her to pass the word to the others to scatter when we make a disturbance. To scatter and to hide during daylight. It's getting lighter every minute!"

Ashraf whispered to the girl. There was obviously more than bare instruction in the murmuring. It could be seen by her flirtatious dimpling.

But at last the consultation was over, and the four young men began to inch back to their former position. When they had moved as far from the women and children as possible, they nodded to each other and began a noisy, stumbling run.

The peasants were so occupied that the first disturbance was unheeded, but then one man yelled, and another.

"They're trying to get away!"

"Quick! After them!"

The boys were surprised that they had been able to run as far as they had before the hordes of villagers knocked them to the ground in an angry attack. They were crushed and pummeled, bruised and beaten, but when they were lifted to their feet again they saw that their purpose had been accomplished. Not one of the palace women or one child could be seen.

There was a baffled uproar when the peasants noticed the absence, and many of them started to search, only to return in minutes to defend their riches from their neighbors.

Natu had seen, from under the bodies that struggled on top of the shackled boys, the village women hustle the palace families out of sight. It was not done out of sympathy, Natu knew, but from an aversion to having their men keep other women and children to feed beside themselves. Whatever the purpose, it had had the desired effect, and the boys now had to worry only about their own future.

It was soon to be decided.

20

RANI came out of the mud hut into the hot, steaming dawn. Her thoughts were on the empty kettle and her plans for foraging for the small, wiggly things that must replenish it. Her foot touched something warm and soft. With a stifled gasp she looked down.

"Pung! Pung, you came home!" She bent over and caressed the relaxed cat. "Did Natu come too? Is Sunara here?"

She knew that they were not or they would have made their presence known. The worry for their safety was still with her, but the dreadful loneliness left when Pung had raised her orange eyes and gazed deeply into Rani's. Pung made a few friendly chirps, then stretched her long, lean body and went back to sleep.

Rani believed that fairly soon Pung would become hungry and leave her to hunt. Perhaps she would bring home part of her kill, as Natu had taught her. She, Rani, would go to the stream for water and search for wild cabbage. The cabbage was scarce and very rank-smelling, but the broth it made was heartening. Then, if Pung brought home

a part of a rabbit or bird, it could strengthen the soup even more.

With a last pat on Pung's head, Rani headed down toward the stream. She saw three vultures circling high in the sky. Something must be dying. If it were dead, the vultures would not still be in the air.

As she neared the stream, she saw one vulture and then another swoop earthward. The third was still cautiously circling. Whatever was attracting them must be near the stream. It might be worth investigating.

The trickle of water was being backed up by something. It was deeper than usual and not flowing with any rapidity.

Rani took advantage of the backed-up water to fill her clay pot, then left it on the bank and slowly went downstream.

After several turns in the stream bed she saw the thing that had made a dam. It was a large, battered heap of something. The vultures had not yet attacked. They were waiting in bushes on the cliffside now. The third bird had landed close by and was watching the thing with the other two.

Rani quickened her steps. The huge mound that dammed the stream couldn't be an animal. It was covered in muddy, torn shreds of fabric. She saw, in a minute, that it was a human being.

Running now, she shooed the birds. Their only response was to cock their bald heads and regard her with cruel, cold eyes. She clapped her hands at them, but they did not move.

Now she was close to the dam. She saw the monstrous frame slumped sideways, collapsed as though there were no bones to give the body form. The head lolled back and the bearded jaw hung in an unnatural position. It was a man. A man with fierce black eyebrows that met over an aquiline nose.

She had never seen a man so layered in fat, and she had a feeling of revulsion, but he was a human and she must do what she could to save him if he were not yet dead.

Rani put her head down to his chest and heard a faint beat. Now what to do? He was far too enormous for her to move. There was nobody to help her. She had to move him from the water, protect him from the vultures, and somehow get him to her hut. How?

She thought of Pung and, cupping her hands around her mouth, she called, "Pung! Pung!"

Pung used to come when Natu called her but had never bothered for anyone else. A note of desperation and fright sounded in her next call. "Pung! Help, Pung!"

Rani could not go to get the cheetah and leave the body for the vultures. If Pung didn't pay attention, it was up to her to do what she could. She started to strip some of the man's garment and braid the pieces together. It was a material she had never seen before. The parts that were not muddied had a pretty shine. However, that was unimportant. Her purpose was to make a sturdy rope. One of the tough vines that Natu had always found useful would help. She left her braiding and went to the cliffside.

The vultures' beady eyes followed her movements with a purposeful patience.

She unwound yards of vine from the scrubby trees. It would do very well if she could break it where she wanted. It was too tough for her hands. Her teeth made dents, but the vine wouldn't come apart. She would have to follow it, untangling as she went, to its roots.

Rani was halfway up the steep cliff when she got to the end. With all her strength she yanked and the root gave way. Only the bushes kept her from falling down the cliff and into the stream to join the inert body.

When she had scrambled back, Pung was calmly sniffing

the huge man and lapping the water that he had dammed up.

"Oh, Pung! You came!" Rani panted.

Quickly she braided the vine in with the strips of material until she had a rope several yards long.

But real difficulty faced her. The rope had to be strung around the vast body. It was impossible to lift the man, but she put the rope flat on the stream bed, pushed until the body had rolled onto its face, and then secured the rope under the arms. But she had to hurry. The man's battered head was in water and he would drown.

"Quick, Pung! Come here!"

Pung looked at her with inattention. A rustle in a nearby bush sounded more inviting. But Pung wasn't truly hungry yet, so she did as Rani commanded.

Rani tied one end of the rope around Pung's barrel chest and to her collar and took the other end herself.

"Now pull!"

To Rani's surprise, Pung did just that. The rope had reminded her of the hunts before she had been carried on a palanquin—those hunts when she had strained at the leash. It had always been a challenge to pull her attendants off their feet and now she felt the same urge.

The fat body moved a foot. Then another foot. Rani was straining her utmost and all Pung's sinews and muscles were visible as the great weight slowly was eased up the stream. The head was well out of the water now, so that worry was past.

The cheetah and the frail woman paused to rest their tired bodies every few minutes. Their progress was snail-slow, but it was progress.

The hardest and longest part of the pull was up the path from the stream and through the thorn to the hut. The limp body of the man was scratched and torn by the spikes of the bushes.

But at last they arrived at the hut's door. Pung seemed to feel that she had done her share and lay down to finish her nap, even though she was still roped to the man's body.

"Come on, Pung! We've got to get him inside. Pung! Help just a little more!"

But Pung looked at Rani with her calm eyes, sighed, and stretched out on the bare earth.

Well, that was that. Rani couldn't do it by herself and when she looked at the door and then at the man she realized that he was too big to get through anyway. She unknotted the rope from Pung and pulled it free from the fat body.

Exhaustion made her want to throw herself on the ground beside Pung, but it seemed useless to have dragged the man all the way up here if she were to let him die. Wearily she prepared her wet ash poultices and began to apply them to his gashed head and torn skin. A piece of cloth she wrapped around his sagging jaw.

Rest was not for her yet. She must feed the dying fire, retrieve her pot of water, hunt for wild cabbage and a grasshopper or two, and then build a shelter over the man to protect him from the sun.

The fire was glowing well when she left for the stream. The water was trickling in its usual way, no longer being dammed. The vultures, who had heavily fluttered along in Rani's and Pung's wake, were no longer to be seen. Two somewhat withered cabbages rewarded Rani's search, and she picked up her pot of water and tiredly climbed to the hut. The grasshoppers would have to wait for another day. All she wanted now was to shelter the man hurriedly and go to sleep.

Pung was still stretched out and didn't bother to open an eye as Rani collected branches and leaves to make her hospital shelter.

When shade covered the man's face, he moved. Rani

dipped a cloth in her water and dribbled it into the man's partially open mouth. She mopped his face and as much of his fat body as she could. His lips moved. She dribbled more water in them and was pleased when she saw the throat make a swallowing motion.

She couldn't sleep yet. She had to make her cabbage soup. Her patient might need it soon.

There was a bit of rice flour left and she added it to the bubbling pot. As she stirred it, Pung leisurely got up and without a backward glance gracefully trotted down the path.

Some hours later Rani was drowsing in the shade, half waking now and then to glance at her patient, when Pung came back. She had an unidentifiable chunk of meat in her jaws which she dropped in the dust before making herself comfortable.

"Dear Pung! You remembered! Good Pung!"

Pung looked pleased with herself and her eyes half closed in appreciation of her just praise.

Rani added the meat to the pot and soon good smells were coming from it.

Only the odor of food might awaken the Maharaja! He stirred and his eyes opened. Words began to form on his swollen lips. Rani came close to listen. The words made little sense.

"Curs and poverty go together," he said.

That certainly was true, Rani thought, remembering the pye-dogs in Pathan. But what a thing to talk about after his dreadful accident!

"Luck?" the man continued. "There is no such thing! We live what we are! I, for one, am smart enough never to do business with anyone smarter than myself!"

The man was clearly out of his head. Who could he be? Rani wondered.

"Without the Maharaja, what other scapegoat could be found for the slum dwellers?"

His eyes searched Rani without seeing her.

"They scratch their sons and blame it on the Prince."

"Would you like some soup?" Rani asked.

"Illness and poverty are supposed to ennoble people. No! No, it only breeds resentment."

"Soup?"

"Hungry! Where are my sons?"

"I'll get you some."

"Corroding fear! Protect me! Help! They're after me!"

Rani spooned the liquid into the man's quivering lips and he quieted and swallowed.

Soon he was sleeping. Rani and Pung supped on soup also, Pung showing a lack of enthusiasm for the broth.

Shortly they both slept too.

The sky was milky with dawn when Rani was awakened by a cry.

"Rani! My mother!" It was Sunara's voice. Pung sprang through the thorns and down the path first. But the cheetah had hardly greeted the bedraggled girl before Rani ran down the path and threw her arms around her daughter and held her close.

Rani couldn't talk through her glad tears. She just took Sunara's hand and led her through the thorns, Pung ambling behind. Then the words came.

"My Sunara! My beloved daughter! I didn't know whether I'd ever see you again. But I must hush. We have a wounded man. Look there!" she said when they were near the hut.

Sunara saw the great bulk of human flesh under a leaf shelter and a glimmer of recognition flitted through her mind. That black beard surrounding that small, red mouth!

"It couldn't be," she whispered as she went closer. "But it is! My mother, did you know you were housing the Maharaja? I saw him only once, but it was enough! No one else could look like that!"

Rani turned pale. "I—I couldn't have known! He was hurt and I brought him here. Pung helped. But—but thanks be to Vishnu, he's out of his head. He babbles nonsense. Oh, Sunara, do you remember that the holy man told us to keep away from the Maharaja and anything that was his? Is this part of the punishment for my sins? I don't care for myself, but will he harm you, my daughter, or Natu?"

A startled look came into her eyes. "You haven't told me about Natu! Where is he? Is he coming?"

Sunara's tired tears came then. She told Rani of their escape from the dungeons and Natu's capture by the villagers.

"And all because he was so kind and carried an old man all the way to the village! If he hadn't done that, he'd be here now!"

Rani put her arm around Sunara when the girl told her of her guilt in not finding out where Natu was to be taken.

"I did not run away. I hid and watched. But I fell asleep! Fell asleep like a baby when it was so important to follow!"

"Don't cry, my daughter! You did what you could! Together we will think of something. Hush now, hush! Tell me how you found your way home."

Wearily Sunara related how she had followed the villagers and prisoners back to the palace where they stored the treasure for safekeeping, and talked of taking the prisoners away to die, for the Vedic laws forbade killing. When the girl had awakened and found evening coming and everyone gone, she had heard whinnying, yowls, and shrill trumpeting from the stables. Thinking of Pung, she knew the palace animals were hungry. Fearfully she unleashed every one of the cheetahs and shooed them outside to do

their own hunting. Then she let the horses out of their stalls and watched them pound out of sight. Finally she went fearfully to the elephant compound and used all her strength to remove the heavy bar and open the gate, hiding behind it as the animals lumbered out.

Her journey home through the forest had been frustrating when she was lost, frightening when she heard ominous noises, until, finally, she had followed an elephant that crashed through the underbrush and led her to the plain. Then she knew where she was and struggled the long way to the line of trees that marked the cliff and the stream below.

As she talked, they felt eyes upon them and turned to see the Maharaja staring. His eyes were no longer unseeing, but sharp and intelligent.

21

Rani and Sunara were frozen into silence at the look in the Maharaja's fierce, black eyes.

"I've seen you before," he said with his stare fixed on Sunara.

"Yes, Your Highness! I was the one you put in prison."

"I've put hundreds in prison, girl. Be more specific!"

"You—you thought I had stolen Pung's collar."

"Ah, I see. You're the one who stole Puransing and her collar and her love! How'd you get out of the dungeon? As a matter of fact, how'd I get here?"

Rani started to explain his presence at her lowly hut, but he interrupted.

"A ridiculous situation! I must leave immediately."

He tried to get up and sank back with a groan. "You seem to have me at your mercy!" His voice was harsh with anger. "Which one of my villages are we in?"

"We're not in a village," Sunara said.

"Well, which village do you belong to?"

"We don't belong to a village, sir! This is our home in the Gir Forest."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Sunara and this is my adopted mother, Rani."

"That doesn't mean anything to me!"

At that moment Pung leaned over the fat prince. The familiar voice had attracted her attention.

"Puransing!" The Maharaja's voice had lost its sharpness. "Now I remember! You led me through the forest and over the plain. But what happened then, my beautiful cat?"

Sunara and Rani were amazed to hear Pung called beautiful. To them she was a funny-looking, though a dear, animal.

"What happened, I said!" he shouted at the two women and the softness had left his words.

"You fell down the cliff, sir," Rani said in a low voice. "You were hurt, so Pung and I brought you to our home."

"Who else helped?"

"No one. We were alone with only three vultures to see our struggles."

"Impossible! A frail woman and a skinny cat carry me? Impossible!"

"We didn't carry you, sir. We—we pulled."

The Maharaja was silent. Pung had settled in the shade at his side and his hand rested on her tawny hide. He looked at Rani and at Sunara, looked away, and looked again. Next he raised one hand and the other and counted his jeweled rings. Then he looked at the women again, open disbelief in his glowering visage. All his rings were accounted for!

He tried once or twice to get up, but each time he sank back with a smothered groan. He touched his aching head and felt the poultices.

"What's this?" he roared as though his honor and dignity had been violated.

"Sunara," Rani whispered, "you must be hungry! I have cabbage soup."

"I could eat anything," Sunara answered.

"I said, What's this?" the Prince shouted.

"I have bandaged your wounds, sir," Rani said. "Would —would you care for some soup too?"

"Peasant fare? Certainly not!" But the Maharaja watched as Sunara greedily drank her broth. "Eh—well—since there is nothing else."

Rani spooned the warm soup into the Prince's smacking lips. He didn't thank her, but his eyes gradually closed with satisfaction and presently he slept.

The sleep didn't last long. There were tremendous crashes nearby, and Rani screamed when she saw a large, gray mountain loom above the thorn hedge. Sunara had been napping too, but when she woke and saw what had frightened her mother, she laughed.

"That's the elephant that showed me the way home!" she said. "It must have followed me from the cliff."

The Maharaja was able to lift his head. "Koonki!" he cried. "How glad I am to see you! Both my favorite animals are here! Now where are my sons?"

Sunara was emboldened to speak. "I don't know where they are, Your Highness, but I know what happened to them."

"Go on, girl! Tell me!"

Before she could begin, Koonki decided that she was too far from the family group and started tearing down the thorn.

"No!" Rani cried. "The thorn is our only protection! Stop! Stop!"

The elephant raised her head and looked at this woman who was yelling at her.

The Maharaja knew that his own safety was involved. Elephants were not aware of rank, and in his helplessness he could just as easily be attacked as the women. He tried to remember the words that mahouts used to discipline the big beast. The words wouldn't come, so he roared and thundered in a surprisingly strong fashion for one so recently injured. "Koonki! Stay where you are! Don't come any closer! Leave the thorn alone!"

To everyone's surprise, the elephant moved back a few paces and calmly began to strip the other bushes of their dusty foliage, casting a mild, red eye at the unreasonable people at the hut.

Pung had recognized an old hunting companion, and ambled down the path to sniff at the big beast. Koonki paid no attention, but she obviously didn't resent the cat's company.

The Maharaja let out a deep sigh. "Now tell me, girl." His voice was not quite so fierce.

Sunara related the whole tale, not leaving out anything about herself or Natu. When she told of the gold and jewels the villagers quarreled over, the Maharaja growled. When she described the three young men shackled together to whom Natu was then tied, he cried, "My sons! Ashraf and Kedah! Then what happened?"

She went on, not failing to tell of her own guilt in sleeping, and the Prince murmured, "Fool girl!" when she told of releasing the palace animals, he sighed and said, "For the best, I suppose."

She described her own trip through the forest. The Maharaja looked thoughtful. "Tell me again about my wives and children."

Sunara related the actions of the village women.

"And you say the peasants were going to take my sons somewhere?"

"Not only your sons. A pale young man and my brother, Natu!"

"How did Glen know Natu?"

Rani answered that question. "Glen used to come here, sir, to teach my son."

The Maharaja looked astounded. "Teach your son? You are just peasants, aren't you? Surely your son is incapable of learning!"

For answer Rani went into the hut and came back with the books on mathematics and history.

"This is most curious," the Prince mused.

After a few minutes of silence he tried once more to lift himself, with the same result as before. His head hurt abominably when it was raised. He lay back, frowning.

"Very curious," he repeated.

Koonki wandered off in search of more edible fodder, and Pung disappeared on her daily hunt. Rani started to change the dressings on the Maharaja's head.

"What is that frightful stuff?" the Prince shouted when she had the paste of wet ash ready to apply. "Are you trying to kill me? Oh, how degrading to be at the mercy of the unwashed!"

Rani said nothing. She went about the business of doctoring and the Maharaja had to admit to himself that this woman was anything but unwashed. Her garments were ragged but fresh with frequent rinsings. He murmured again, "Curious!"

Sunara had gone to the stream to clean herself and she fairly sparkled when she came back in a sari that was shabby but white. She wore her half of the sapphire bracelet with no attempt to hide it from the Prince. His eyes fastened on the gleaming jewels and he frowned.

"Where is the rest of Puransing's collar?" he asked after a period of thought. "A—a peasant wearing sapphires! How ridiculous!"

"Natu has the other half, Your Highness," Sunara answered. "Although I don't know why."

"I'll tell you why, my daughter! When you were lost I took off my bracelet and hung it on the wall. Natu took it with him when Glen came to tell him you were in prison. He thought it might be useful. But—but you've not told me how you got lost."

"The Maharaja's son, the one he calls Ashraf, stole me!"

"My son?" the Prince yelled. "My son Ashraf stole you? But it was Kedah who said he was in love with you and wanted you for his own!"

It was Sunara's turn to be surprised. "I don't understand," she said. "I don't know Kedah and the only time I saw him was when he was tied by the villagers. No, that's wrong. I saw him once on horseback, but I don't know him!"

There was a thoughtful silence. Rani had finished dressing the Prince's wounds and went to feed the little fire. Sunara and the Maharaja stared at each other. Suddenly the Maharaja laughed. "I get the picture," he said. "Ashraf stole you and I put you in prison for stealing the sapphires and Kedah lied to free you! What sons I have!"

It was unclear as to whether he was proud or ashamed of those sons.

"Will you have some soup, sir?" Rani asked.

"Soup again! I want some curry!"

"We have no curry, sir, only the soup."

The Maharaja could feel his fat melting away. His abnormal appetite had not been satisfied for days. It was surprising to him that, aside from his aching head wounds, he really felt quite well. However, he did crave some curry! A glass of wine would be welcome too.

As some days passed, the Prince grew strong enough to sit up where he could watch, with horror, meat or insects going into the kettle from which he was fed. This was against his orthodox laws. A Brahman learned a high respect for the sanctity of life—nothing that moved must be eaten. However, he must eat and keep up his strength, so he prayed to Brahma to forgive him.

In the meantime he was beginning to have a grudging respect for the two women who cared for him. It was difficult for him to show any politeness or to talk in any but an imperious fashion, but he knew his welfare was in their hands. These women obviously were of a higher class than his villagers. They were clean, in the first place, and in the second, they had a certain dignity that he had been unable to break down.

As he grew better he began to search his mind as to likely places where his sons might be.

One morning he sat up straight and shouted, "I have it! I know where they've taken them!"

Sunara and Rani looked at him in surprise. Pung turned her lazy head, her orange eyes expressing disapproval of a disturbed rest. Koonki, who appeared and disappeared from day to day, lifted her massive head and waved her trunk.

"I've used the place myself," the Prince exclaimed, "for special enemies. It is, it has to be, the Rann Desert. If only I'm not too late! Koonki can take me there. You'll have to help!"

Sunara expressed doubts about the Maharaja's health, but Rani quickly rebandaged his healing wounds and steadied him to his feet.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Rani asked.

"You'd only hold me up! You'd have to walk while I rode Koonki. It would take too long."

"Couldn't Koonki carry all of us?" Sunara asked.

"A maharaja sharing an elephant with peasant women? Certainly not!"

With difficulty and help from Koonki, they got the Prince mounted on the animal's neck and watched them go upstream.

"May Vishnu help you to find our sons!" Rani cried after them.

It was a relief for the women to be by themselves once more. They swept, scrubbed their clothes, hunted for insects and cabbage, and bathed leisurely. They put a fresh assortment of dry leaves on the Maharaja's shelter and spruced up his pallet.

In a few hours Koonki came back. The Maharaja was slumped across her broad back.

22

IT WAS HARD to walk in the crablike manner the shackles forced on them. Ashraf kept up a constant complaint. "If you would walk backward, Kedah, I could do better!" Kedah glared at his half brother and continued as before. Natu and Glen had worked out the easiest solution to the same problem. They staggered their steps so the bonds didn't pull either one off balance.

Behind them, occasionally prodding them with bullock poles, the villagers swarmed, each keeping account of everyone else so that none could go back to the treasure.

"Faster! Faster!" they yelled at their prisoners, but it was soon apparent that at a faster pace one boy or another tripped and fell. Time was wasted getting him to his feet again.

Hour after hot, dusty hour, they trudged along. Sometimes a villager complained. "Do we have to take them all the way there?" or "Why can't we take turns in driving them ahead of us? Some of us could rest and then catch up and others could rest—" All such ideas and suggestions were quickly shouted down. Nobody trusted anybody else.

Raging thirst tortured the youths. They were not allowed to stop for water in the few streams they passed. When the sun set there was some relief from the heat, but by now they stumbled every few feet, sometimes a pair of them fell to the earth and lay there resting until prodded into their shambling walk again.

They walked throughout the night. Kedah and Ashraf watched Natu and Glen, who had devised a scheme to relieve each other. For a hundred paces Natu supported Glen, then for the next hundred Glen supported Natu. Kedah and Ashraf tried it, but Ashraf leaned so heavily when it was his turn to rest that soon Kedah refused to continue.

The dark of night slipped into a red dawn and soon the sun blazed down pitilessly.

The boys were unaware of the passing, torturing hours. They walked and stumbled and fell and got up again in dazed insensibility. At last Kedah noticed that they were in a different type of land.

"Glen," he murmured, "I think we're in the salt flats. I think this is almost the end of our trip. I believe the peasants plan to leave us in the Rann Desert." His dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he tried to talk. Glen didn't answer. There was nothing to say.

Ashraf was beyond words. He was willing to be anywhere if he could just lie down and rest.

Natu had learned about the Rann Desert from Glen. His mind was hazily wondering how they could get out of this hopeless mess.

Kedah was right about the villagers' plan for them. They

arrived at a place that was so white in the burning sun they had to close their eyes against the glare.

They felt the peasants' hands on them. They were re-shackled, all four of them tied together with knots wet with spit to make them impossible to loosen. Then their legs were tied the same way. They were facing each other and the thongs were so arranged that not one of them could take a step, nor could they sit or lie down.

One villager said, "*That* for the sons and friends of His Exalted Highness!"

The boys watched their captors hurry away. Ashraf was sagging. Glen spoke to him sharply. "We can't support your weight, boy. Stand up like a man! We must put our minds on escape."

"Escape!" Ashraf groaned. "Escape when we can't even move? We'll be dead in an hour."

"Nonsense!" Kedah said. "There's always something we can do. We just must not give up hope!"

Despite his brave words, Kedah's hopes were dim indeed. He looked at Ashraf and felt conflicting emotions. He despised his brother's softness, but he *was* his brother. A fun-loving, self-indulgent boy, to be pitied rather than hated. He looked at Glen, whose clenched jaw gave Kedah some comfort. There was no weakness there. He looked at Natu, Natu who was an unknown quantity but on whose face was firm determination. Kedah stopped his inventory and listened. There had been a strange noise. There it was again! A sort of high-pitched whinny.

"Do you hear it? Vishnu preserve us!"

Then all of them heard a thundering of hooves and saw a great cloud of dust that moved toward them. The boys were paralyzed with fright as well as being immobile from their thongs. Ashraf's eyes were closed. Glen's were slits. Natu's whites showed all around the black centers. Kedah's eyes showed resignation.

Out of the dust a herd of wild asses appeared and swerved out of their path to avoid the huddled youths.

They were beautiful, Kedah thought, as he peered at them through half-closed eyes. Fine, handsome creatures about twelve hands high, of a bright, sandy color with mane and dorsal stripe of dark chestnut. They had short ears. He watched them as they halted in a ballooning cloud of dust, some hundred yards beyond the boys. The glare was hurting Kedah's eyes, inflamed and parched, but he saw the animals' heads go down. That meant there was either something to graze on or water! "Can we move at all, do you think?" he asked.

They tried a sidewise shuffle, moving first their toes and following with the heels. The trouble was that as one of them moved an inch in one direction, another moved in the opposite. Something had to be done.

"I have an idea," Natu said. "Hold still now!"

"As if we could move!" Ashraf murmured bitterly.

Natu examined the leather strap that shackled him. It was a single thong that had been tied, joining his wrists, with about eight inches between his hands. Glen's wrists had been tied in the same manner. What bound them together was that the loops were intertwined like a link in a chain.

Natu had seen this kind of cincture before. It was used to restrain prisoners, shackle goats, and tie up merchandise that had been left by vendors while they sought booths in which to display their wares. Natu also had seen how to unfetter the bonds. He didn't know exactly how or why it worked—he would just try to remember. With a frown of concentration, he started.

Natu held his thong that looped through Glen's. He folded the middle of it and forced it through the tight cuff on his own wrist. He pulled it until there was enough to slip over his entire hand. It worked! He was free of Glen!

He then did the same for Kedah and Ashraf. They looked on in amazed disbelief. Now their hands were shackled to their own hands but no longer chained to each other. Although all of their eight feet were still tied together, they could sit down. The hot, salty sand burned them when they sat, but they didn't care. Glen, Kedah, and Ashraf watched in complete fascination as Natu worked on their foot bonds. These were harder to manipulate because they were tighter and had only just been put on.

"How did you learn this, Natu?" Kedah asked.

"I used to be a thief," Natu answered with naturalness. "Many of the things I stole were chained in this fashion." This wasn't strictly true, but it was close enough to accuracy.

"A thief!" Ashraf sounded scornful.

"A thief, yes, like you."

"Me!"

"You stole my sister, didn't you? And for pleasure, not necessity, which makes you more of a thief than I."

Kedah laughed. "He has you there, my brother. And I say hurrah for a thief that can get us out of this mess, don't you? Don't you, Ashraf?"

Ashraf grudgingly agreed.

Glen was helping Natu. The thongs were very tight around their ankles, and it hurt them to have the loop pulled through far enough to go over their feet. But at last they were free of each other. They still were hobbled, of course, and when they got to their feet they found that their steps had to be mincing, ten-inch ones.

But they shuffled painfully the hundred yards or so to where the wild asses had been either eating or drinking. The creatures had galloped off and disappeared into the shimmering heat. The salt flats made mirages. A lake seemed to beckon them, but Kedah told them not to be fooled. He had heard about the hazards of following a mirage.

They arrived at the spot the asses had found so enticing. It was a disappointment. It was a spongy, dark patch. Nothing grew and there was no water to be seen. Ashraf moaned.

"Look," Glen said. "Look at that deep hoofprint. Isn't that water at the bottom of it?"

The boys fell on the spongy mass and dug with their hands. There was first some moisture and then water began to seep into the holes they had made. It tasted terrible, salty and full of minerals, but it was wet.

"Now what?" Kedah asked. "Do we stay where we can drink or do we try to find our way home? And where is home, anyway? The palace must be full of villagers by now!"

"I have a home," Natu said.

23

THE MAHARAJA was a humbled man when he regained consciousness under his familiar shelter.

"You had to do it again! Pull me up here, I mean, and bandage me!" he said.

"There were two of us this time, sir," Rani answered. "And both Pung and Koonki helped. How did it happen? The biggest wound on your head has reopened and there are some new gashes. You—you didn't find our sons, did you?"

"I failed. I didn't get anywhere near the Rann Desert. I guess it was a tree branch that hit me. I felt a dreadful pain in my head, and the next thing I knew I was lying here in my shelter."

Rani and Sunara were tearfully silent. The Maharaja squirmed. It was unbearable to his pride to have to admit he could fail in anything, and humiliating to have to accept these women's ministrations and scanty food and to watch their sorrow.

"You—you may keep the sapphire bracelet," he said to Sunara.

"Oh," Sunara said, "without my brother who gave it to me, it doesn't mean anything. If it means something to you —here, take it!"

She took the bracelet from her thin wrist and handed it indifferently to the Prince. He turned his head away to hide the hurt in his eyes. His fingers loosely held the bracelet while he thought, for the first time, that there were people in the world to whom wealth meant nothing. It was an extraordinary idea. Here he held a minor fortune in his limp fingers and the girl couldn't care less.

He watched Rani and Sunara push their disappointment and sorrow behind them and continue to do their accustomed tasks.

A variety of alien thoughts passed through the Maharaja's mind. For the first time in his life he questioned the rightness of his deeds. He tried to push the thoughts away. He must stay fierce, strong, all-powerful! He was the Maharaja, and life and death were in his hands! His power came directly from the sun and moon. He tried, but he couldn't make his mind behave.

"Rani!" he shouted.

"I'm here, sir, no need to strain your voice."

"Rani, are you afraid of me? Am I a very terrifying person?"

"Why, no, sir."

"You, Sunara? Do I strike terror into your heart?"

"No, Your Highness. I was frightened of you when you put me in prison, but now—" Sunara suddenly saw that the

Prince needed reassurance. "Now I'm—I'm still frightened."

The Maharaja could tell that she wasn't remotely scared of him, that she was sorry for him. This was unbearable to the Prince. Where were all the fear and trembling he used to see when he confronted anyone? Gone! Now they felt sorry for him! He began to feel sorry for himself. He was just a fat old man, and not very fat any more at that! He felt two unaccustomed tears squeeze through his closed eyes.

Sunara leaned over him. "Are you asleep?" she murmured.

"No."

"I have decided to go back to the palace."

"No! No, my daughter, you mustn't!" Rani cried.

"I must. Perhaps I can find out where they took Natu and your sons and the pale one. I—I can't just sit here and do nothing. I'll ride on Koonki if you think I can, and it won't take long."

"I've told you," the Maharaja said, "that they are in the Rann Desert."

"But we're not sure, are we? If they are, I could ride Koonki there, and if they're not, I'll try to find out where they are. I'll be careful, dearest mother. Please don't fret. This has to be done!"

Rani's face was drawn with grief when Sunara bravely mounted the docile Koonki and started downstream. Even the Prince's brow was furrowed, not in its usual fierceness, but in genuine worry.

The hours passed slowly for the Prince. Rani kept herself busy. Pung was content to rest in the shade beside the Maharaja. She had hunted and was well fed and saw no reason to hunt again. The empty stewpot meant nothing to her. So Rani did the hunting, glad of the occupation. It would be meager fare for herself and the Prince this day.

Boiled leaves, a few tired cabbage stalks, a scant handful of wild grain flavored with a bit of cress she had found by the stream.

The Prince made no complaint even though his empty belly and paining head and disturbing thoughts kept him from sleeping when night came. The night dragged and he was glad to see the dawn.

It was shortly after the sun was fully out that he and Rani heard the crashing approach of the elephant. They waited, tensely, to see if Sunara was with the big beast. The relief they felt when they saw her sitting on Koonki's neck left them weak. She waved and dismounted in the only way she knew, by jumping into the nearest bush.

"I didn't find out anything about our boys," she panted when she reached the hut. "Everybody was too drunk to answer a question, so I hurried back to keep you from worrying. Your Highness, the palace is overrun with villagers and they must have found your wine. The ones that weren't asleep were staggering around, yelling and laughing, and some were crying!"

She paused for breath, then, "Cattle and goats and chickens wander freely in and out of the palace! Nobody has bothered to clean up anything! It's a terrible mess! I found my way to the women's quarters, the purdah. Your wives and children are there! They've locked themselves inside and the peasants can't get to them. I don't think they care right now because of the wine. I talked to one girl, a very pretty girl, through the lattice. She said that all the women had weapons of one kind or another. Even the littlest children had pointed sticks. They'll fight if they have to. But she didn't know anything about Kedah and Ashraf. I had to leave, but I'll go back soon. The peasants may finish all the wine in a hurry, and when they're sober I might get information."

"You are a very brave girl, Sunara!" the Maharaja said. "I thank Brahma for your safe return and for the safety of my wives and children. Oh, if I could only *do* something!"

They were startled to hear Pung make a loud chirp. They watched her round ears pitch forward, then instead of her usual dainty, picking walk, she catapulted herself down the path. Sunara raced after her.

In a minute the Maharaja and Rani heard glad cries. "He's here, my mother! Natu has returned! The others are here too!"

Rani ran down the hill. The Prince shakily got to his feet, but dizziness made him quickly sit down again.

It was a bedraggled procession that staggered up the hill to the hut. Rani had her arm around her son, Sunara pulled Glen by the thong that bound his hands, and Kedah and Ashraf half walked, half crawled. The boys were soaked from having flung themselves into the life-giving stream. The dust had turned to streaked mud. Pung sniffed from one to the other and then settled by Natu's side.

There was a shocked, frozen silence when the youths saw the Maharaja. Kedah was the first to find his voice.

"You—my father—w-what are you doing here?"

Ashraf opened his mouth several times, but no words came. The surprise was too much. Glen and Natu could only stare.

The Maharaja's voice was thick with emotion. "My sons! Oh, praise be to the gods! You're alive!"

It was soon apparent that although the boys were alive, they weren't in good shape. The thongs that bound their hands and feet had cut into their swollen flesh. They were starving and still thirsty despite the plunge into the stream. Rani got busy at once and ordered Sunara to do the same.

The Prince wanted to assist but found that he had no idea how to be helpful.

Natu's sharpened stones were brought from the hut and the two women started to saw on the thongs. It was painful. Flesh was cut as well as rope.

Natu bore the pain without flinching. Glen bit his lips and breathed hard. Kedah clenched his teeth. Ashraf cried out, loud and then louder. The Maharaja watched with absorbed interest and attention, looking from one young face to another.

When at last the boys were free and had been fed the thin soup, Natu, Glen, and Ashraf quickly fell into exhausted sleep. Kedah limped to his father's side.

Before a word could be exchanged Rani was there with her wet ashes. "It looks disgusting, Kedah," the Prince said, "but it's surprisingly effective. Let her put it on your wrists and ankles."

Kedah looked at his father with astonishment. He had never heard him talk in a soft, reasonable manner before. That was not the only change. The Maharaja's huge girth had shrunk to the proportions of a moderately stout man. The rolls of flabby fat had disappeared. But the strangest change of all was in his black eyes. Those eyes which had glinted fire had actually turned somewhat mellow! They looked from under the black brows with something akin to kindliness! Kedah could hardly believe it.

Rani and Sunara were working with the sleeping boys' hurts.

"Go and rest now, Kedah," the Prince said. "We'll have a talk when all of you are awake." He put out his hand to where the cheetah was accustomed to lie at his side. She wasn't there. She was with her love—Natu. The Maharaja felt a moment of resentment, but relief for his sons' safety quickly took its place and he dozed in contentment.

The boys slept as if they would never wake up. Rani and Sunara had washed, hunted for food, fed the fire,

brought water from the stream. Pung became hungry and left. The Prince woke up once and nodded off again.

It wasn't long before Pung came back, a bloody chunk of meat in her jaws. Rani quickly added it to the bubbling pot and whispered her thanks to the cheetah.

The smell of food soon stirred the youths. They awoke to find their wrists and ankles neatly bandaged and comfortable. The long sleep had renewed them considerably and only their howling stomachs gave them discomfort.

"What are we eating?" Ashraf asked as he finished his second bowl.

"It would be better not to ask," the Maharaja said.

"It tastes good," Kedah said, "but like nothing I've ever eaten before."

Glen and Natu smiled. The taste of meat naturally would be unfamiliar to the boys.

"Will you help me to sit up, Sunara, my dear?" the Prince asked, and his sons and Glen looked at him in open-mouthed astonishment. Never, not ever, had they heard him utter a plea. Commands fiercely given with immediate obedience exacted were what they had come to expect from the Maharaja. He saw their surprise and smiled.

"Not only the young can learn," he said. "These kind women have taught me more than—"

"These peasants, these—these—" Ashraf couldn't complete his sentence he was so aghast.

"They could teach you a thing or two," the Prince snapped in almost his old way. "Now," he continued, "to clear matters up I'd like to know about you, Natu, you and your family. You are of a higher caste, are you not, than your circumstances indicate?"

Natu looked at his mother. He looked at Sunara and Glen and still he hesitated.

"Well, boy?"

"It will hurt you more than us, Your Highness, when you know the truth! We—we are Bhangis."

"Untouchables!" Ashraf cried. "And we've touched them, slept beside them, and eaten their food!"

The Prince had grown ashen and Kedah looked shocked. Only Glen was calm.

"Can we cleanse ourselves of the contact, my father?" Kedah asked. "I—I don't know what to think! They have been our friends, but—but can we change our beliefs? Change our religion? What do we do?"

"We get out of here quick!" Ashraf said. "We go home and scrub ourselves!"

"Home?" the Maharaja whispered. "Have we any home but this?"

Rani sat with downcast eyes. Sunara stood glaring at everyone in defiance. Natu looked sorry for the shock he had given them. Glen got to his feet. "I've known this for a long time," he said. "I've taught this boy and been with his mother. I don't feel contaminated. In fact I feel honored by their friendship! They are not only as clean as we are, they are equally intelligent! Isn't it time your prejudices were forgotten?"

Ashraf looked at Glen with horror. The Prince looked as if he were going to reprimand the tutor for his impertinence but, instead, he and Kedah looked at Glen questioningly. It was hard to overcome what they had been taught all their lives, hard to believe that an untouchable was more than an animal, dreadful to feel obligated to such.

Natu's face showed sympathy. "It is still the dry season," he said. "My family and I will move to another location. You may stay here until we, I mean *you*, can recover your own home. Come, my mother and sister, gather our things and we'll move upstream."

The Maharaja cleared his throat. He looked bewildered

and his words were unsure. "My sons, would you let these —these people behave with more courtesy than we?"

"But," Kedah showed his mental turmoil, "but what should we do? With your approval, my father, I will pretend they are not untouchables! It is unthinkable that they should move. Tell us what to do!"

"I say we leave here," Ashraf said.

"I don't believe your opinion was asked." The Maharaja seemed to be recovering from the shock. "It's an unthinking suggestion you make. Where would we go, what would we eat, how would we protect ourselves? I'm beginning to think that you are a fool, Ashraf!"

24

Nobody slept well that night. The knowledge that their hosts were untouchables kept the Maharaja and his sons in a mental uproar. Natu, Sunara, and Rani were unsure of what they should do. They were aware of their station in this world and felt no resentment of the attitude of their betters. Who knew? They might be born to the purple in the next incarnation and their feelings would echo those of the royal family. Glen was sleepless trying to ponder the insoluble problem: how to get these people together, how to create an understanding, how to introduce democracy to a caste-bound society.

In the early morning they were all alerted to a new and different sound in the Gir Forest. A deep and persistent rumbling, not far off, had made Koonki's ear flop forward.

"I know what that is," Kedah said. "It's the digestive tracts of elephants! Their stomachs rumble!"

"Do you suppose they are *my* elephants?" the Prince asked. "Not wild ones?"

The caste problem was forgotten in their new interest.

"I have an idea," Natu said. "If we captured these elephants and kept them here, we could use them to invade the palace and get it back for you, Your Highness!"

"A good thought, Natu, but just how do we get the elephants?" The Maharaja showed recovered strength in the timbre of his voice. "And if we could capture them, how could we keep them here?"

"I think the stream brought them here in the first place, sir. Water is a necessity and they would probably linger anyway."

"Kedah," the Prince said, "you spent most of your time with the animals when we were at home. What's your opinion?"

"I've watched the mahouts capture wild elephants, my father. They noose them with rope. You remember that you outlawed the capture by pits because it was dangerous to the animals? Roping is dangerous to the mahouts, but it preserves the elephants. And these may be our tame ones, so it would be easy. The wild ones that were captured recently are probably far away by now."

"Ashraf"—the Maharaja turned to his other son—"have you an opinion?"

"Yes, my father! Send Natu and the girl to get the elephants."

"I rather thought that is what you'd say!"

Sunara stood up. "I am used to Koonki," she said. "I'll be glad to go and I think Natu will too!"

"Oh, don't be mistaken!" Ashraf hastened to add, talking to his father as if nobody else were present. "It's not that I'm afraid! It's that—well—after all, these people are—are—well, they're of the class that does things for *our* class, you see!"

"I see, indeed!" the Maharaja said.

Kedah walked over to Natu. "Come, my friend, let's see what can be done!"

"Me too!" Glen exclaimed.

"Oh, well, if you two are going, I will too!" Ashraf said.

"You're not going to leave me, are you?" Sunara was indignant.

"We'll need you later, my sister. Help Rani while we're gone."

The Maharaja was deep in thought when Rani approached him. "I think, sir, that I know what Natu has in mind. If you wouldn't object, sir, I will wash this shiny cloth of yours. It hangs on you because it is far too big for you now! I can make three garments from it. One for you and one for each of your sons. If you are all dressed like kings, the peasants will know who you are!"

The Maharaja's eyes glowed fiercely. "That they will!" he said. "Your idea is not bad, but will silver cloth wash?"

"I know nothing about silver, sir, but when I wash something, it comes clean!"

Rani helped the Prince out of the folds of muddied silver. They stopped to listen to their sons' voices in the distance, proud looks on both their faces.

Pung had left with the boys, and Sunara was busy gathering pieces of material, fingering the length that Rani had woven in Pathan and that had been lifted off the loom so long ago.

"Should we use this too, my mother? It's such lovely, soft stuff!"

"Let me see it, Sunara!" the Maharaja said. Sunara handed him an end of the length. "Why, it's lovely," he said. "How did you do this, Rani?"

"Bits and pieces that were given me or found, sir. Everything weavable went onto my loom. I loved weaving." She sighed. "It was the one happy moment of the day when I

could sit down in front of my loom and dream that each thrust of the shuttle was a step away from our life of poverty." She turned to Sunara. "We need not wash it, my daughter, but we will certainly use it!"

Shortly after, both Sunara and Rani were at the stream, washing the pieces of cloth, pounding a stain when required, spreading the laundry to dry on bushes and gently sponging the silver cloth. A series of chirps made them turn.

Pung was picking her way toward the women, and behind her was a big male cheetah. He acknowledged the women's presence casually with a glance of his orange eyes, but his interest was clearly in Pung. And then, to Sunara's and Rani's astonishment and trepidation, a dozen more cheetahs appeared. A cheetah whom they had made a pet of was an acceptable thing, but a *dozen* strange animals? Animals with claws and appetites? They flung the last pieces of material onto the bushes and ran for home.

It was the Prince's turn for surprise when the women rushed past him and into the hut and were calmly followed by fourteen cheetahs. He recognized each one of them as they sniffed at him and he called them by name. They settled around him as if nothing had happened to any of them since the old palace days. Cautiously, Rani and Sunara emerged from the hut.

"Don't be frightened," the Maharaja said. "These are members of my hunting stable. Poor things, they don't look too well, do they?"

It was true that they were thin and their spotted coats were rough and scarred in places. They looked at the Prince and the women with expectancy. Humans had always fed them and cared for them. Clearly it was time for them to do so again. The Prince sighed. "I wish I could," he whispered. "I wish I could treat you as you deserve, my beauties!"

A crash of branches made all the cats sit up. When they saw the great, gray backs of five familiar elephants loom above the thorn hedge, they lay down again.

"Four have followed us, Your Highness!" Natu's voice rang over the crashing approach. "We didn't need to rope them! They were glad to see us!"

Kedah could be heard now. "They're looking for the fruit they were given in captivity, I think. There are a couple more back there. They'll probably come too!"

Ashraf and Glen were the first to arrive at the hut. Their surprise was comical when they saw there was no space left for them. It was a carpet of cheetahs, and they had to pick their way gingerly over the relaxed bodies of the big cats.

"Where did they come from?" Ashraf asked, but he was too excited to wait for an answer. "Koonki must have told the elephants that we were here. They're thin but they're all right. Still tame!"

"Puransing gathered the cheetahs for us," his father said. "I believe that our animals and the help of these good people are going to make our return possible."

When Kedah and Natu came, they laughed out loud at the spread of cheetahs. Quickly they were silenced by the Maharaja's solemn words. "We will have to move soon," he said. "The animals won't stay with us if we can't feed them! How quickly can you make our garments, Rani?"

"If Sunara and I work all night, sir, they'll be ready in the morning. But can you travel, sir? Can you sit up easily?"

The Maharaja raised himself first onto one elbow, then to a full sitting position. A small attack of dizziness passed with only a barely perceptible sway. "I feel fine," he said.

It was a hopeful sign when Pung left purposefully. The big male followed, but the other cheetahs merely opened sleepy eyes and closed them again. Pung would bring something for the stewpot and the humans would be fed. But what about the cats? When they were forced to forage for

themselves would they return? And the elephants! The foliage around the homesite was completely gone, eaten by Koonki in days past. The big beasts would have to stray far afield to get sufficient greenery. Would they come back? It was a worry.

Natu said that he had seen bees and believed that he could get some honey. Glen said that he would help. Kedah volunteered to search for soup greens down by the stream. The Prince told Ashraf to go with his brother.

Sunara left to pick up the washed material, and Rani went for fire-feeding twigs, moss, and wood.

The Maharaja was alone with the animals. His thoughts turned to the uncritical affection given by dumb beasts. Their loyalty made him feel unworthy.

"Do you know what's wrong with me?" he asked the nearest cheetah. "I have never done a thing I was proud of!"

The cheetah looked unimpressed.

"And now my muscles have softened, my tongue is losing its briskness, my mind is going slack!"

The cheetah showed its boredom with a toothy yawn.

"But," the Maharaja thundered suddenly, making the cheetah jump, "I shall still do things worthy of my name!"

"Did you call, Your Highness?" Sunara ran up the hill with her arms full of snowy white cloth, a sparkling glimpse of silver showing between the folds.

The Maharaja reassured her. One by one the others returned. Kedah and Ashraf had gathered cabbage, cress, and tender shoots of some unknown plant. Natu and Glen came back with a small pot of honey and many bee stings. Rani was loaded down with fuel. Pung returned with the forequarters of a young pig. The big male was not with her, and when she laid the meat by Natu, the other cheetahs, smelling meat, remembered their hunger and took off after Pung, who evidently was returning to the kill.

As the soup bubbled, Rani and Sunara began assembling suitably royal garments for the Prince and his sons.

Glen surprised everyone by saying, "Time for lessons!"

"Lessons! Here?" Ashraf exclaimed.

"Why not?" Glen said. "Get your books, Natu!"

The Maharaja listened in fascinated disbelief when Natu read from the history book. He kept muttering to himself, "Impossible! An untouchable can't read! He can't, but he is! Impossible!"

Ashraf and Kedah were forced to try harder just to keep up with Natu. It was humiliating to find that a member of a low caste could outdo them in anything.

Rani and Sunara were glad that their heads were bent over their sewing, hiding their happy pride in Natu and their satisfaction in the Prince's surprise.

Later that evening the Maharaja crept onto his knees. "All of us will pray to Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva! We will pray that our animals will make a big enough showing to frighten the peasants. We will pray to Lakshmi that the garments Rani and Sunara are making will impress the villagers with the image of royalty. We will pray that our foraging animals will return and that we will be victorious when we invade the palace!"

Through all their minds ran the uncomfortable thought that there were just seven of them and hundreds of peasants to contend with!

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The Hindus and Muslims had always been on the brink of battle. Their religious wars, triggered by the smallest imagined insult, had been stiffly punished by the Maharaja's absolute despotism. Now, with none to lead or administer correction, they let their hatred of each other rule their emotions. The Hindus were enraged when a sacred cow was slaughtered to satisfy the Muslims' meat-hunger. The Muslims were angered by a suspected slur on their god, Allah. Hostility flourished inside and out of the palace. The food, the wine, the riches, were peculiarly unsatisfying to both factions.

The villagers did not have the slightest idea how to take care of, or how to enjoy, a palace. All their lives they had been told what to do and how to do it. Now they ran wild like undisciplined children.

And like undisciplined children, they were unhappy. Never in the world would they admit it or express a desire for the return of the Maharaja and his cruelties. They spoke to each other, if they spoke at all between quarrels, of how great it was to have plentiful food, wine, and gold, how fine not to have to work, how nice to occupy the palace. But as the palace became a stinking, verminous shambles and the wine dwindled to the last few bottles,

and the food became scarce, and the gold and jewels glinted mockingly at them, their discontent and irritation with one another grew.

A source of annoyance and mystery to the men, and a satisfaction to their wives, was the impenetrable purdah where the Maharaja's women lived on a seemingly unending supply of food. The villagers' anger would have been even greater had they known that the purdah's supplies were cunningly supplemented from the palace larders by their own wives.

The men, in filthy dhotis, lolled in the shade and tried to tell themselves how happy and well-off they were. Their restlessness showed in easily picked fights with their neighbors, their wives, their children, and imagined enemies.

And so, when the high minister rode in on his horse with marriage contracts bulging his saddlebags, he brought his mount to a sudden halt and gaped in horrified disbelief at the shambles of the palace and its peasant inhabitants. At once a chill of fear ran down his spine. It seemed apparent to him that the royal family had been murdered and the palace retainers had, no doubt, met the same horrible fate.

About to turn his horse and flee for safety, he noticed that the peasants looked at him lethargically and only a few slowly got to their feet and ambled toward him. A brilliant thought crept into his mind. The Prince, undoubtedly dead, and his two oldest sons, dead or departed, would offer no hindrance. He, the minister, would take command, become a maharaja himself, enjoy the riches and privileges he had envied for so long. The peasants would not resist, he was sure. He could recognize their apathy as an advantage to his plans. They lay in slothful relaxation in the shade or wandered without purpose, some toward him, but mostly to a shadier resting spot.

"Arise!" he shouted boldly. "Arise and salaam to your

new maharaja!" He sat regally in his saddle and tried to look like a prince. To his embarrassed dismay, none of the peasants paid him any attention.

"You shall be hung by your ears!" he screamed, hoping that the threat would stir them. A few eyes blinked at him, but no one moved.

He changed his tone. "Those of you who approach and salaam will be made my palace staff!" He was almost pleading.

"A*ha!*" his frustrated anger made his voice shrill. "You shall be put into the dungeons for the rest of your lives! You shall be beheaded! hung by your thumbs! beaten and—"

A loud peal of laughter halted the minister and startled the peasants. From behind the stables came Koonki with the Maharaja on her neck. The Maharaja was gleamingly dressed in white and silver and his face was creased into laugh lines. Right behind him were two more elephants ridden by Kedah and Ashraf. Both boys were almost as gloriously garbed as their father in snowy white with silver sashes and turbans. They were laughing aloud and chatting gaily as if they were just coming home from a pleasant visit. The villagers looked at those living ghosts with a cringing fear. Behind them came the pale young man on a fourth elephant. He was also dressed in clean clothes and wore a happy smile on his face. Following him lumbered a fifth beast which carried two women and a boy.

At the elephants' knees a cluster of cheetahs paced with dignity, hurrying a bit more now that they were at the home where food had been plentiful.

The peasants were startled onto their feet. The unexpected and laughing arrival of those they had thought dead had the immediate effect that the stunned minister had failed to achieve.

As the cavalcade neared the palace, and peasant after

peasant cowered to the ground in the belief that the Prince and his sons were indeed a part of the sun and moon and therefore indestructible, a very old man stood tall and pointed a shaking finger at the elephant bearing three passengers.

"There they are!" the old voice quavered. "The lad and girl who rescued me from the dungeons! They are good people and I, for one, will offer my services to them!"

His announcement made little sense, in as much as the three on the elephant were certainly not of the royal family. However, his sentiment had an effect on the rest of the cringing peasants.

"We will serve His Exalted Highness!"

"Long live the Prince and his family!"

"His Gracious Highness will not punish our foolishness, will he? Will he?"

"The gold and jewels are here, untouched! Only some food and wine are gone! Forgive us, Your Highness! There are too many of us to punish, aren't there? Aren't there?"

The Maharaja brought Koonki to a halt. The cheetahs patiently sat by the beast's big feet.

"I shall reserve my judgment of you, my villagers," he said in a strong, vibrant voice. "If, inside of the time it takes to recite the Vedic laws, you have cleaned out the palace, sent your animals to their paddocks, and gone back to your villages, I will forgive you! I will do more. I will reduce your taxes! But in return I want good work in the fields! Now!" He clapped his hands and in a flash the peasants had rushed to do their cleaning and shepherding.

Somehow the word of the Maharaja's return and triumph spread. Singly and in pathetic groups, palace guards, hungry and shabby from hiding in the forest, came forth. A few pale, wan ministers pretended they had not run when the revolution took place and fell to their knees in front of the Maharaja.

The high minister, just back from his travels and embarrassed to have been caught trying to capture power for himself, eased forward with an ingratiating and humble smile on his frightened face. "I have here, Your Exalted Highness, contracts for the marriages of all your children. You will be pleased by my selections, I—"

"Tear them up!" the Prince bellowed. "I will have no forced weddings in my princedom."

"B-but you s-sent me to—" The confused minister was in a state of shock.

"What I did or said has nothing to do with anything now. Tear them up!"

One by one the shamefaced mahouts and stable attendants appeared to take over their old jobs. Palace cooks and servants glided silently into their domains, hoping not to be noticed.

"My wives and children," the Prince said to Kedah. "Tell them we are here. I will visit them as soon as I can."

"May I go too, my father?" Ashraf looked timidly at his sire. The Maharaja laughed.

"Your pretty little cousin, eh?"

Ashraf looked frightened and abashed.

"All right, my son. I punished you unfairly. She is not one of my wives! She is the daughter of my greatest enemy, the Maharaja of Daflapur. That's why I was angry with you, but I see now that many things I have done need undoing. She shall have the choice of staying here or going back to her ugly father. Don't mistake me—I hate him still and might steal another of his daughters if the mood strikes me. Don't think that I've gone soft. The first person who angers me will be hung by his thumbs!"

His sons felt a surge of relief at their father's old spirit returning. Kindness was fine but softness was not.

The Maharaja watched the boys go toward the women's quarters and turned around in time to see the elephant with

Natu, Rani, and Sunara quietly heading for the forest.

"Stop them, Glen!" he shouted. "Get them back! Hurry, hurry, before they disappear!"

Puransing was leaving with them, and the Prince was surprised that the old jealousy no longer pricked his heart.

Glen, inexpertly, got his elephant turned around and tried to hasten the beast. The elephant would not be hurried. It was near its own paddock where fruit and juicy grass had abounded and it had no desire for the wilds where forage had to be worked for. It planted all four heavy feet and stopped. No kicking behind the ear would budge it. Glen called, "Natu! Come back! The Maharaja wants you!"

Natu heard the voice, but not the words. He raised his hand in a wave as the elephant carried him and his family out of sight into the dense forest.

"Will you be glad to be home again, my mother? Home without all the royalty and animals?" Natu asked.

Rani answered thoughtfully. "It is our home and I will be glad to get there, but Natu, it will be even lonelier than ever!"

"Oh, so very lonely and quiet!" Sunara wailed softly.

Natu acknowledged to himself that it was going to be rather desolate, but he could not afford to agree with his women.

"But," he said, "it is ours! We have no other place to go! I am hoping that Glen will come again to continue the lessons. Sunara, you will be able to study with me! It will be a good life!" He searched for more things to reassure himself as well as his family. "A good life, and the rains should come soon!"

As he said these words of comfort, a crashing behind them brought their elephant to a halt. Glen's voice came from the shadows. His elephant was being driven by a mahout, a ragged, dirty mahout, but one who obviously

was glad to be back on the job. He prodded the big beast up to Natu's animal.

"Natu!" Glen said. "Why did you leave? The Prince wants you. He told me to tell you that you will have a house near the palace. Your mother will weave for him. Sunara will help in the purdah, and you are to join his sons in their lessons!"

Natu was speechless. He allowed his elephant to turn and follow the other toward the palace. Sunara expressed her joy by pounding on the shoulders and head of her adopted brother, and Rani hugged her knees tight to keep from laughing out loud with happiness for herself and her family.

Palace and village life were soon back to normal. The Maharaja had some moments of harshness and cruelty, but that was to be expected, and for the most part he treated his villagers more sympathetically. His Exalted Highness named Kedah to succeed him, with Glen to stay on as adviser. Ashraf was allowed to live the life of pleasure he craved. The seven daughters of the Prince were not made to marry until they chose, and the "pretty little cousin" elected to stay near Ashraf. Pung lived in freedom between the stables for food and Natu's house for love and visits to the palace for the special attention the Maharaja gave her.

Afterword

Present-day India discourages child marriages, not only from the humane point of view but from modern medical information which shows that the offspring from a very young mother is quick to sicken and die.

British rule of India started in 1757 and ended in 1948. In the almost two hundred years of occupation, the British accomplished many reforms. Perhaps the most important was the abolishment of the rite of suttee in 1829.

Disease, dirt, and ignorance are still characteristics of India, but some sanitation has been forced on the people despite bitter protests that their religion forbids the new ways. What their fathers, grandfathers, and great-great-grandfathers did, or put up with, must be followed exactly or in their next life (incarnation), they believe that they will be punished. Gradually the Indians are being convinced that the old ways can be improved upon.

The caste system continues in force despite official disapproval, but there is a leveling tendency in modern India, a Westernization, which promises an elevation of the outcastes, or untouchables.

Glossary of Indian Words

Anna Hindu coin, four pice, one sixteenth of a rupee.

Bazaar A marketplace.

Bhang A narcotic made from hemp.

Brahma The supreme maker of life, the deity who created the universe, the God of Hindu mythology often described as intelligence and bliss.

Brahman Member of the highest Hindu caste.

Dhoti Long loin cloth that wraps around the hips and drapes over the shoulder.

Pice A small Hindu coin, one fourth of an anna, about half a U.S. penny.

Purdah A place to seclude women.

Rupee A Hindu coin equal to about thirteen American cents today.

Salaam A salutation by bowing very low and placing the right palm on the forehead.

Sari Hindu woman's garment, a long cloth that is wrapped counterclockwise around the waist to cover the legs, draped full in front, wound over the bosom, left shoulder, and sometimes covers the head.

Shudra (Also *Bhangi* and *Sudra*) An untouchable.

Suttee A rite. The cremation of a Hindu woman who sacrifices herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Untouchable A person of the lowest classes, whose touch is a defilement to members of the higher castes.

(Continued from front flap)

did not know then that Pung, the pet cheetah who belonged to the cruel Maharaja of the province, would lead him into dangerous adventures in the palace, or to the pale Englishman, or to the royal elephants and the dungeons, or to the two young princes . . .

This is a thrilling story full of the color and the filth, the despair and the hope, the wisdom and the ignorance of age-old India.

ELSIE W. STROTHER was brought up in Cuba and Santo Domingo, where formal education was impossible. A series of tutors and gigantic reading lists prepared her for a school in Paris—Ecole St. James, which she attended for one year. After studying sculpture and painting in Paris and at the New York School of Design she taught painting in the Philippines, and in Aiken and Charleston, South Carolina. She has traveled all over the world with her husband, who is a general in the U.S. Air Force. Now, at home in Colorado Springs, Colorado, she is writing as well as painting, and has published children's stories in many national magazines.

Jacket design by Linda Ormansky

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The Secret of Bireh

On her wedding day the women of the village covered fourteen-year-old Sara's eyes with silver petals, as was the custom in Palestine around the time of World War I. When the greedy Turkish soldiers stationed in the hamlet saw the gold coins sewn into the bride's marital headdress they seized and imprisoned Hamid, the young groom. Since Palestine was ravaged by war Sara's people hid their treasures, smuggled food to their soldiers, and survived as best they could. Sara's own fate was determined by her strange green eyes, inherited from a long-ago Crusader. A colorful and harsh picture of a land much in the news today.

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